Interview with Fernando E. Rondon

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR FERNANDO E. RONDON

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RONDON: I was born May 6, 1936 in Los Angeles, California. My father was Peruvian and my mother Mexican. Both were immigrants who met in Los Angeles. They married and I was born and raised in Los Angeles. My father had graduated from the University of San Marcos in Lima. In LA, his first job was writing subtitles for 20th Century-Fox. Eventually, he entered the chemical exporting business. During WW II, he made a considerable amount of money buying chemicals in Latin America on behalf of an LA import company. My mother was a housewife who raised three children—my brother and sister and myself.

When I was thirteen the family moved to Mexico City, where I went to a Jesuit high school —which no longer exists—Instituto Patria, which was later sold because the Jesuits wanted to concentrate on social work. It is there that I learned my Spanish. The school had a student population of three American boys and almost 2,000 Mexican boys. I lived in Mexico for approximately six years. I went to college in the US.

I never considered myself as Mexican. When I went there I was just thirteen and was just starting to date. I had my heart set on going to Loyola High School in LA, but that was obviously not to be. I really didn't want to go to Mexico City and spent my first year fighting my being there. I was determined to return to the US as soon as possible, even if I had

to join the Army at eighteen. Over time I accepted being in Mexico and did very well in school, even though I never stopped yearning to return to the US— above all to California.

I have only had two “black eyes” in my life, both obtained in school in Mexico. I was a member of the debating club at school. One day we debated the status of Eva Peron: saint or sinner. I took the position that she was a whore, which was somewhat an exaggeration. The person who was defending her sainthood, who later became a Jesuit priest, punched me in the eye. We soon made up and he became one of my best friends.

I later got into a fight over the Mexican-American War. I maintained that the Mexicans had provoked the war because they thought they could beat the United States and thereby teach us a lesson. The Mexican government at the time did not realize how strong the US really was—and perhaps the US itself did not recognize its strength. My position again generated a fight. There is a lot of strong passion in Mexico on that war, but I must say that growing up in Mexico, I did not experience any personal anti-Americanism. When the Pan-American games took place in Mexico in the 1950s, I rooted for the US. I felt very lonely because I must have been the only—or at least one of very few—spectators that rooted for the US. The Mexicans always rooted for their fellow Latins.

After graduating from high school in 1955, I went to the University of California at Berkeley on a full scholarship for my freshman year. Since my goal at the time was to obtain a degree in chemical engineering, I might have applied to Cal Tech, Notre Dame or UC—all schools with good programs in chemical engineering. But since my high school was only for boys, I was looking for a co-ed institution and so rejected Notre Dame quickly and just as quickly accepted the UC opportunity. I graduated from UC in 1960.

Berkeley was tough for me because, although I had attended the best high school in Mexico City, my education had been almost entirely by rote. When I got to Berkeley, I was put in remedial Algebra and English. I think the University's assignments were understandable as far as English was concerned. As for math, I already had had analytical

geometry and calculus in high school but I was not trained to solve word problems. In Mexico, we were taught how to solve equations, but we didn't know how to plant the equation. It was a tough first semester.

My first year forced me to examine whether I was heading in the right direction. Eventually, I decided to change majors and try business administration, with an informal minor in history. I planned to graduate with 36 credits in business administration and 30 in history. History, in fact, was almost a lark; I got straight As. Business administration was less interesting, but more practical.

In truth, I had already made up my mind that I wanted to be an American diplomat. The idea came to me as a result of knowing quite a few children of diplomats in Mexico City. I decided that I wanted to represent the United States.

I didn't study specifically for the Foreign Service. I already knew the entrance examination was difficult and that one should not plan on passing it, at least the first time. I was advised to have an alternative career in mind and business administration was a good option.

In 1958 I had joined the California National Guard because I anticipated being drafted upon graduation. In 1960 I entered six months active duty, serving at Fort Ord and Fort Sam Houston as a medic. Meantime I had entered Macy's California training program and, after the army, I was assigned as a sales manager at Macy's new store in Stanford.

Before entering the Army, I had taken the Foreign Service examination. I received a score of 69 which was just one point below passing. However, at the time, the Department was granting five points to those who had a language skill. The five points for my Spanish pushed my total score above the passing level. I remember one question during the orals particularly because I thought it was quite strange. I was asked whether I knew Tom Lehrer—the Harvard professor known for his satirical and somewhat risque songs which made fun of a number of American institutions, such as the Boys Scouts. I answered affirmatively. I was then asked what I thought of him. I said that I enjoyed him. Then I was

asked whether someone who enjoyed Lehrer was fit to serve in the Foreign Service. I said that I laugh at and with Lehrer; that did not mean that I took him seriously. That was the end of that line of questioning.

I should mention two things that happened in Berkeley. In Mexico, I was a very devout Catholic. I had considered becoming a priest—if I could be a Jesuit one. But since I liked girls, the priesthood lost a lot of appeal. I was very intolerant of Protestants. When I went to UC, I took Philosophy 101 and had an opportunity to read some great philosophers like Bertrand Russell. My views changed substantially; I certainly became far more tolerant.

In 1958, I joined a fraternity. At the time, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was meeting in San Francisco. I was going to attend some of the hearings, but the school administration, concerned about potential outbreaks at the hearings, encouraged the fraternities to have exchanges with sororities. The school administration accomplished its objective because I certainly ranked girls above congressional hearings and therefore did not go to San Francisco but stayed in Berkeley for the exchange. The Committee hearing room was packed with Daughters of the American Revolution and the students could not get in. They were beaten by the police and dragged down the steps of the Federal Building in San Francisco. The students' photographs were taken and they were reportedly carded. It occurred to me later that my goal to be a Foreign Service officer might well have been derailed had I gone to the hearings.

When I entered the Foreign Service in 1961, I was assigned first to the A-100 course. It was a good class. No single student really stood out, but I think Frank Wisner was the most impressive of the lot. He had had a lot of experience in foreign affairs, thanks to his father. He was a real gentleman. In 1962, when our assignments were made, there was no question of “bargaining”; we went where we were told to go.

I married Marian Hand in March 1962, between the end of the A-100 course and the beginning of the consular course. We had met on a blind date at Berkeley and she was as excited about the Foreign Service as I was.

I should note that when I entered the Foreign Service, I only had one wish: not to serve in Latin America. I wanted to serve in areas where the name “Fernando Rondon” was viewed as an American name. So when we were asked for our three assignment preferences during the A-100 course, I asked for the Iberian Peninsula, Western Europe and the Near East, in that order. Subsequently, I was told that I had “lucked out” and would be assigned to Tehran, which was in my third preference (if one stretched the term “Near East”).

So we went to Tehran and served there from 1962 to 1964. Our embassy was large, headed by Ambassador Julius Holmes. As a rotational officer, I had to serve for six months in each of the four major Embassy sections. I got to know the Embassy very well.

This was the period of the Shah's “White Revolution.” Women had been given the right to vote. The mullahs were throwing acid at women. The first time I was duty officer, which lasted for a week, I had to sleep in the Chancery one night because the mullahs had announced that they were going to march from Qom to Tehran. The capital became very tense. I remember most vividly the call I received from the brigadier general in charge of the US Military Group; he wanted to know what his people should do. I suggested that he tell his staff just to stay home. I was surprised that I was telling a general what he should do. I immediately told the Ambassador what I had done; he approved of my response.

Later, when our son, Mark, was born in June 1963, there were riots in Tehran precipitated by the religious right. The American military hospital was situated across from the Shah's palace. My wife had to check into the hospital during the day; a curfew was in force at night. She delivered early the next morning but, because of the curfew, I couldn't get to the hospital until daylight, thereby missing the birth of our son.

I taught conversational English at the University of Tehran. Dialogues with the students always turned to the Shah. The students were much opposed to the monarchy. I would mention the “White Revolution” and other societal “advances” that had been fostered by the Shah. The answer was invariably: “Iran is the Shah's country; not ours.” I was always struck by this student attitude; they felt no ownership of their country. The students detested the Shah.

I was also struck by how deep religious feelings went in Iran. People were very, very devout. At the time, I did not know that this feeling of devotion would be used against the regime. While I was in Iran, the main threats to the regime came from the left, not the right. The students were essentially of a leftist persuasion. I did not imagine the church aligned with the left, although there were certainly leftist mullahs. But it was eventually the religious right that brought the Shah down.

I think the quality of the political and economic reporting that I saw was very high. There was a lot of debate within the Embassy about the political direction of the country. Bill Miller, who later worked for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, was a young political officer in the Embassy. He knew a lot about the opposition; he had very good contacts and was very articulate. Martin Herz was the Political Counselor—very bright; he ensured that the reporting included what was called “opposition flavor.” There was no question of where the US stood; we supported the Shah. We were disturbed by the strength of the opposition; we hoped that the Shah could win over his people, but embassy reporting was not blindly pro-Shah.

During my six months in the Consular Section, I was exposed to everything except immigrant visas. I worked on non-immigrant visas, citizenship and passport services. I remember well how desperate many young Iranians were to study in the US. They would lie; they would promise anything; they would sign anything to get a US visa. We therefore

had to be careful as we made decisions on the applications. I didn't resent the lying; that was almost a cultural pattern.

When I was in the Citizenship and Passport Section, the wife of an American oil man died in Tehran. She was fairly young and her death shocked the oil company. We helped her husband ship the remains to the US, as required by law and regulations. The gentleman later came to the Consular Section to thank us; he said he had never been to an American embassy. As a member of the John Birch Society (an organization which viewed the US government as riddled with communists), he avoided any contacts with the US government. He said that he had not realized how embassies help US citizens and was both impressed and grateful.

I was very impressed by Ambassador Holmes. Of all of the ambassadors I worked for in my career, Holmes was the most “old school” one. He took an interest in each junior officer and would meet with each when they were the embassy's duty officer. I remember that Mrs. Holmes called on my wife when we had the baby. She didn't let my wife know that she was coming; she didn't want her to fuss about the visit in advance. We felt a lot of loyalty and respect for Ambassador and Mrs. Holmes. They were first rate leaders and role models.

I was in the consular section when President Kennedy was assassinated. I remember being told that he had been killed and I was stunned; I could not believe that such thing could happen to an American President, much less one of Kennedy's stature. Kennedy had touched the junior officers of the Foreign Service. We were well aware of the stories that sometimes he would call a desk officer, by-passing the State Department's chain of command. Furthermore, the second Peace Corps contingent was assigned to Iran. I knew quite a few members of that group. I felt very strongly about Kennedy. When I was in college, I was a young Republican, but I turned against Nixon and joined an informal group of “Young Republicans for Kennedy”. So I cared greatly for Kennedy; his death was a real shock. I was so distressed that today I don't remember what the Iranian reaction was; I can

only remember my own. I am sure that the Iranians had a strong reaction—assassinations having played such an important role in Iranian history—but their reaction just didn't leave a permanent impression on me.

Q: In 1964, you were transferred from Iran. You then went to Arabic language school. How did that come about?

RONDON: An interesting story. I had studied Farsi while in Tehran and had gotten as far as learning the alphabet. I had discovered that Islam is fascinating and thought I would like to study Arabic—I thought I could do well studying that language in light of my experience with Farsi. So I repeatedly volunteered to go to Arab language school; I was totally ignored by the Department.

In fact, in early 1964, I was assigned to San Pedro Sula, Honduras as a vice-consul. I was ready to go there, even though it was not my preference. On my way to the new post, I stopped in Washington and went to see Peter Chase, the officer in PER responsible for assigning personnel to Arab language training. I told him of my many messages volunteering for Arab language training and the lack of response I had received. He asked me whether I was still interested. I confirmed that I was. He asked me what kind of Arabic I wanted to study. I told him, “Western Arabic.” He then asked me whether I spoke French. I said I didn't. Chase said that the Arabic class didn't start until January, but that he could and would get me assigned to the four month French language training class to cover the time before the Arab class started. I told him that sounded fine, but I asked what about my Honduras assignment. He said not to worry; he would take care of that.

So I went to study French for four months followed by an assignment to our language school in Tangier. I studied there until 1966. I was taught Maghrebian Arabic. I thought the program was excellent, although studying Arabic was exhausting. Farsi was easy in comparison; Arabic is difficult. I was mentally exhausted at the end of the instruction day,

so I played tennis to vent my frustrations on that little ball. Our second son, Lawrence, was born in Tangier.

Herb Hoffman and I were the two students who entered at the same time. There were three others who were at a higher level of instruction. When I started, I had no onward assignment. But students in those days mixed lessons with local travel in order to apply their academic learning to real life experiences. I went by train from Morocco to Tunis. I had learned by this time that the relevant question was who I worked for, not where I worked. The management team—John Jernegan and Lewis Hoffacker— in Algeria had the best reputation, so I wanted to serve in Algeria. By sheer chance, an opening became available in Constantine. It was a job classified two grades above my own, but no one else had the Arabic-French language combination that I had. I was assigned to Constantine as Principal Officer. I was there in 1966 and 1967. When the “Six Day War” started we were evacuated and finished our tour in Algiers as members of the American Interests Section of the Embassy of Switzerland.

Constantine was essentially a “listening” post. We were trying to establish good relationships with Algeria. Eastern Algeria probably had been the most militant and violent part of the country in its war of liberation from the French. A lot of the guerrilla warfare had taken place in that region. It was a one officer post. My wife, Marian, was my administrative assistant. I had an admin assistant for a while, but he was withdrawn. We lived over the offices. I would travel a lot in Eastern Algeria. Almost all of the provincial governors had fought in the Revolution; very few had finished high school. Many of them were my age and therefore, in general, we related to each other well.

I had available to me the opportunity to support financially—from AID—what was then called “self-help” projects. These were small development projects; we would provide financial resources up to $5,000. But these projects required my oversight to ensure that the funds were expended in accordance with the grant agreement. That was a very good rationale for traveling. I well remember that everywhere I went, very high—if not on

top— on the people's “wish” list was a mosque. We couldn't finance the construction of such institutions, but at times we were able to support the construction of school rooms that might be attached to the mosque. Most often, we financed water projects, road improvements, etc.

What struck me was that the French had tried to capture Algeria's soul, while the Algerians were focusing on finding their God. That was very much part of their drive for independence. The tensions created by these two entirely different goals were very striking.

Algerians could be very difficult. As I said, normally they would speak to me but occasionally they would not. The FLN was a leftist party. It was upset with our Vietnam policies. It thought that we favored Israel to the detriment of the Muslim neighbors. I could establish personal contacts, but regardless of the relationship, our views of the world were very far apart. It has often been said that of all the Arabs, the Algerians are the most dour but the eastern Algerians were far more open than their brethren in Algiers. They didn't live in a capital or even a large city; they were essentially country people. They viewed Algiers as a police state—highly controlled. In my region I was pretty well known. I drove a big government car—big by Algerian standards—and was quite open about my movements and activities. People were fairly warm and, as I said, I felt generationally close to some of the provincial leaders. It was hard for me as an American not to have some sympathy for their struggle for independence.

President Kennedy was a hero to the Algerians; President Johnson was not. Of course, Kennedy had been assassinated by the time I arrived in Algeria, but his memory lingered very strongly. Johnson had to carry the burden of Vietnam. We were viewed by the Algerians as imperialists—the successors to the still hated French. They identified with the Viet Cong and were vigorous in their denunciation of our Vietnam policy.

Israel was a surprisingly easier subject to discuss. I had not been in Israel nor did I know the Palestinians. The discussions would often turn to the issue of self-determination, which of course was also close to Algerian hearts, but the topic of Israel was never a source of uncomfortable conversations.

There were still a lot of French in Eastern Algeria. We tended to socialize with the French and a few US missionaries. I'll never forget my initial courtesy call on the Soviet Consul General in Annaba. It was an early morning call and I had eaten a large breakfast, knowing we would toast with vodka. While I was with the Consul General, the Soviets invited my chauffeur in for a drink. He emerged dead drunk! I never allowed him near the Soviets again. We were not close to any Algerian; we were rarely invited to Algerian homes. They would entertain me when I traveled, but that was not usually in a home.

On the second day of the 1967 “Six Day War” there were huge riots in Constantine. The Algerians were demonstrating against the US, accusing us of bombing the Arabs. That accusation stemmed from complete ignorance; the Algerians could not believe that Israel could bomb the Arabs almost continually without American involvement. Much of this misinformation had been fed to the media by the Egyptians after their Air Force was essentially wiped out while sitting on the ground. A mob of Algerians broke into our garden and were swarming the window grills, determined to force their way into the Consulate. Marian, our two sons, and the two servants had hidden in the furnace room in the basement where Marian found a woodsman's axe with which she prepared herself to vigorously defend her children against all odds. I was upstairs. Finally, the police came to our rescue and routed the mob. The next day my family was evacuated, thanks to the help of the French Consul General and the manager of Air France. That was particularly interesting because these were the days when General de Gaulle was trying to distance himself from the US. Nonetheless, our French friends had no intention of ignoring the safety of an American friend. The manager of Air France personally escorted my wife and two children through the crowd gathered outside our building and to the airport where he

got them on an Air France flight to Paris. The French Consul General told me that he had not forgotten what Americans had done for his country during WW II and he offered me protection in his residence if needed.

For months afterwards whenever our older boy, Mark, saw a person in uniform he would pick up a stick (or whatever was at hand) to defend his mother.

Day three of the war was quiet in Constantine. Day four, at about 11 pm, all hell broke loose. A small mob broke into the garden again and then forced their way into a second floor guest bedroom. Between us was a heavy wooden door separating the living quarters on the first floor and the stairway to the upper floor. I called the DCM in Algiers, Lew Hoffacker, and told him what was happening. He wished me good luck; that is all. I feared that the door would be knocked down. I didn't think that I would be killed, because the rioters were FLN-led and I thought that I knew the local party well enough to be spared, although mistreatment was not out of the question. I remember drinking 3/4 of a bottle of cognac—probably in fifteen minutes. It didn't help; I was stone sober. After fifteen minutes or so, the police came and cleared the crowd out of the building. The door had held.

I called Lew Hoffacker again and told him that I was safe and that I was going to bed. I can still remember how dry my mouth felt at that moment from drinking the cognac. The next morning, the Governor of Constantine province called me in and told me that he could no longer guarantee my safety, even though the Consulate was just two buildings away form his offices. The police station—and the prison—was right across the street from us. That made it evident that no action against us could have taken place without the consent of the Algerian government. I am sure that the Algerian government just wanted our presence out of Constantine. That night I drove to Algiers—all night. I arrived early in the morning and went to the Chancery where I was met by Lew Hoffacker, who was shocked to see me. I learned later of a story that I had been carried out of the Consulate on a stretcher.

What I didn't know until I got to Algiers was that the night I reported to Lew Hoffacker and he wished me luck, all hell had broken out in the capital as well as in Constantine. Almost all of the official American community had been evacuated that night. The Embassy staff had burned all classified material in barrels that were on the rooftop. The Embassy was situated on a hill. When the fires were started in the barrels, they looked like Roman candles. Algerians downtown thought that the Chancery was on fire. That stopped the mob from marching on the Embassy—since it was already on fire.

The next day the papers reported that the American Ambassador had departed, leaving the impression that the US had left Algeria. Ambassadors don't go “down with the ship;” their departures are political statements. In a strange way, the news of the Ambassador's departure somewhat shielded the Americans who were still in Algiers. In fact, the Swiss flag was hoisted over the Chancery, where it remained for several years.

While in Constantine, we were getting a lot of information about Algerian party politics. Colonel Boumedienne was the President after his coup of 1965. I reported frequently on the political situation in the different regions in my area. At the time, we didn't know very much about these regions. As I mentioned, I would travel to the major towns and report on what I observed and heard, to give Washington a taste of what was happening in some of the “hinterlands” of Algeria. My reporting was mostly journalistic with generally little impact on US policy. I do not remember any riots or disorder in eastern Algeria during the time I was there, until the “Six Day War”. Constantine thought that it was the center of the Algerian people—the “grass roots” and the heart of the revolution. In Constantine, they thought that the revolution had been captured by “outsiders” —e.g. Boumedienne—who did not represent the real Algerian people. Within the FLN there was a split between the so-called “insiders” and the “outsiders.” The insiders spent the revolution as guerrillas in Algeria; the outsiders were located in neighboring Tunis and Morocco. I never guessed that Algeria would be torn apart by religion and politics as is the case today.

From 1967-1968, I served as a consular officer in Algiers, devoting much of my time to assisting the remaining American community. US oil companies had remained. I also did a little political reporting. I should note that only a few officers stayed in Algiers after our flag came down. I think the Algerians limited us to only five officers in the Interests Section in addition to one officer from each of the former constituent posts, Oran and Constantine.

The situation in Algiers was tense for a couple of months after Algeria broke diplomatic, although not consular relations. We tended to stay close to our homes, maintaining a low profile. After that initial period, things calmed down and we did wander away from our homes. As the Algerians learned more about the “Six Day War”, they showed an increasing disillusionment with the Egyptians. They were quite angry at Egypt. We heard a lot of negative comments about Nasser, although that was not what was said officially or in the controlled press. We were limited in our ability to travel; in fact, controls had already been placed on us before the war. Algeria remained a police state.

Lew Hoffacker was left in charge of the Interest Section of the Swiss Embassy. He ran it with great skill and understanding. The Residence was open to the remaining small staff—the “hard” core. The staff became very close. One of us pulled duty every night; the Marine guards had been evacuated so one of the remaining staff had to stay in the Chancery each night. This duty officer had to make hourly rounds to make sure that everything was in order. We were all pretty well tired out by the time we left Algeria.

The Swiss served as hosts on a couple of social occasions. I remember the Swiss Ambassador playing the piano at one of these occasions—the “Stars and Stripes” at that. He was a very warm and nice gentleman. But essentially, the Swiss, despite being the protecting power, left us pretty much alone. Any representations to the Foreign Ministry had to be made by the Swiss on our behalf.

The American oil people, whom I mentioned earlier, were not subjected to any harassment. They were stationed in the desert and focused on oil. As I said, the situation

stabilized soon after the riots and normalcy returned. Algeria did not change very much after the “Six Day War.” American investment was still welcomed and the projects that had been started were permitted to continue. Religious fundamentalism was not an issue at the time, beyond the importance of mosques for the Algerian psyche that I noted earlier. What is happening in Algeria today is a total surprise to me; there were absolutely no indications of the bloody instability that was to follow twenty years later. It is true that while I was in Algeria, there was still considerable instability. Ben Bella was overthrown only about a year before I arrived. Algerians were still trying to find their way.

The Algerians had confiscated a lot of French property. That was a major issue between the two countries. The Algerians began to market their own wine—from grapes grown on former French property. Some of it was pretty good. We could eat well in Algiers; the French influence was not totally eliminated. The last nine months in Algiers were greatly enhanced by the return of my family.

Q: You left Algiers in 1968. Where did you want to go and what happened?

RONDON: My wish was to have an assignment as chief of a political section. I was expecting to continue to serve in the Arab world, but the need for Arabists declined sharply as we broke relations with so many countries in the area. I had learned French; so the Department suggested an assignment to Madagascar. That came as a surprise, but we went. It sounded fine; people who had been there spoke warmly of the country.

In fact, we found Madagascar incredibly comfortable; it was a neo-colonial state. I had never known what the phrase “neo-colonial” meant until I got to Madagascar. Madagascar became independent in 1960 when most of the Francophone states became independent. The President was Philibert Tsiranana. French officials held key posts in his cabinet and military. Almost every minister had a Frenchman as his top civil servant. So the government was very close to France. There were French troops in the country. The country was not really totally independent.

As in Algiers, the French culinary culture continued. The food was wonderful thanks to a number of restaurants run by French citizens. Antananarivo (the name of the capital then) was wonderful. We could travel around that fascinating, peaceful country with little difficulty. French influence was pervasive and stabilizing.

It was very, very important for us to get along with the different Frenchmen who were so influential in the power structure. That influence is my definition of “neo-colonial.” When I returned as Ambassador it was after a revolution which made the country quite different from the one I knew from 1968 to 1970. The French were thrown out temporarily. But in the 1960s, the French influence was overwhelming; they guarded their status jealously and were wary of any potential competitor.

A few months after I left, French interests were involved in a smear campaign against the American Ambassador, Anthony Marshall, which eventually resulted in his being expelled—allegedly for interfering in Malagasy affairs. In my opinion, I think the French resented Marshall's efforts to bring American investment to Madagascar, which was still a French preserve. Marshall was too much of an activist ambassador for France's tastes, although Marshall did his best to include French interests in his creative business projects.

I was the political officer in the Embassy. My first ambassador was David King—a former Congressman from Utah nominated by Lyndon Johnson. He was followed in early 1970 by Marshall. Both were good ambassadors. King learned to speak Malagasy. King was an elder of the Mormon Church; the Malagasy are very religious, so that there was close affinity between the Ambassador and the Malagasy. King's willingness to learn the local language and his religious convictions made King a very popular Ambassador. He was very careful about not stepping on French toes. He did a fine job representing the US.

We had a NASA tracking station on Madagascar. Apollo VIII flew while I was there. We spent a lot of time trying to get the Malagasy interested in outer space; we used to show films; the astronauts visited Madagascar.

We had good relations with the Malagasy and the French living there. That broke down when Marshall was expelled.

Madagascar has a mixed population. The majority coastal people are of African origins; the highland people are of Malayo-Indonesian origin. The ruling political party was coastal-dominated and very pro-French. The highland people were more nationalistic and not so pro-French. They were not a threat, but they were not as close to the French as the coastal people were. There were also religious differences: the coastal people tended to be Catholics; the highlanders were mostly Protestants. This generalization needs to be tempered by recognition of the strong influence of the Lutherans on the coastal people. There was a small Muslim minority in the north of the country.

Our main interest in Madagascar was the NASA tracking station. Madagascar also has one of the world's largest natural harbors at Diego Suarez. We did not want the Soviets to have access to that bay. The 1960s was a time when we wanted to have good relations with every African state. Although we didn't have major American interests in Madagascar, we did have some stakes in the country's pro-Western foreign policies.

The Malagasy are intelligent people. The country had a lot of economic potential. Ambassador Marshall thought that if Madagascar could develop its cattle industry, it could become a major exporter. He interested American business persons in the potential profitability of the cattle business. Marshall, wisely, wanted investment in the cattle industry to be a three-sided affair—Madagascar, France and us. There were French interests that didn't want our involvement in the cattle business or in any business at all for that matter.

There was no problem in making and maintaining contacts in Madagascar. I had good contacts with coastal people, highland people and the French. The Malagasy are very cordial and courteous people. The highland people (the Merina) tended to be better educated and held most of the civil service posts in what was a coastal-run government. The highland people didn't care for the coastal people; they distrusted them. The President

was a coastal man; his security forces were also coastal. That intimidated the highland people; they knew if they didn't behave, the coastal troops might be let loose in the capital. But there were no incidents between the two communities while I was in Madagascar.

There was a leftist movement in the country at the time (AKFM) which had some communist members. There was an indigenous leader, in the southern part of the country, Monja Jaona, who periodically led minor insurgencies; they were troublesome, but no threat to the government. In general, the late 1960s were a tranquil period in Madagascar. I had the opportunity to learn a lot about the country. There was considerable nationalism —people who resented the French presence. I fully expected that one day there would be a strong reaction to the French influence — unlike in Algeria where the religious guerrilla warfare was totally unexpected to me — in Madagascar, I knew there would be a reckoning because the French had not allowed the country to become really independent. So something had to give, particularly in light of the strong nationalistic feelings which existed. We sensed that something would give one day.

Our 1968-70 experience in Madagascar was a very happy one. Our daughter, Susan, was born in Tananarive.

Q: You left Madagascar in 1970 and were assigned to Washington. What did yodo?

RONDON: I was assigned to the Madagascar desk, which also included responsibility for Mauritius, Chad and Gabon. That gave me an opportunity to make my first trip to Black Africa. I had been in South Africa with my wife; that was an eye opener because we got in trouble twice while there. The first time we were found sitting on a bench which was reserved for blacks. The second incident occurred at a railroad station when we entered the wrong door, i.e., the one reserved for blacks. Our stay in South Africa was rather psychologically uncomfortable; we had a hard time dealing with apartheid.

On my way from Madagascar to Washington I visited Chad and Gabon. I was routed through Johannesburg to Libreville, Gabon. I was carrying a book in my briefcase and as I

disembarked in South Africa, the customs officer asked me to open the briefcase. He then saw the book which was “Portnoy's Complaint.” He told me that that book was banned in SA. In fact, I had stopped reading the book because I didn't like it, but I was shocked that someone would tell me that I was carrying a banned book. When the customs man saw my diplomatic passport, he asked me to make sure that I took the book out with me when I left SA. I was thoroughly irritated by that incident.

When I got to Gabon, I was quickly reminded about the problems of a developing country when the customs official held my passport upside down. I went to Cameroon, which I found to be far ahead of the Gabon. They were with it! That brought home the realization that every African country was different and that generalizations about Black Africa are stupid.

When I reported to Washington before starting my tour on the desk, I found out that Ted Eliot had sent my name to the NSC which was looking for an African expert. I was interviewed and was told that if I wanted to work for the NSC I would have to forego home leave and report for duty immediately. That I did and worked for Henry Kissinger for most of the next three years.

Q: So you worked at the NSC from July, 1970 to June 1973?

RONDON: Right. It was a great time to be in the NSC. I should mention that the NSC opportunity arose because there were three unexpected vacancies at the NSC after the bombing of Cambodia. Those vacancies were to be filled by Foreign Service officers. When I was interviewed, I pointed out that I was no African expert; my experience had been in Madagascar and North Africa. The former is not representative of black Africa; the latter did not belong to the African NSC portfolio. But in fact, the lack of experience in the sub-Sahara continent was considered a plus because the NSC did not want someone who knew it all or was too much of an expert because Africa was considered a “back-water.” That troubled me, but I was not about to give up an opportunity to serve in the NSC.

I joined an office of three officers headed by Marshall Wright. He was the senior staffer. Mel Levine was handling international organizations and I handled Africa. Marshall was a very good writer and did a lot of drafting for Kissinger. Kissinger had introduced his annual report on the “State of the World”—a report about the world following the “State of the Union” pattern. It contained chapters on all the major areas of the world, explaining US policies. I prepared the Africa portion of the report, which went through draft after draft. Kissinger might read the first two lines and reject the whole chapter. He seemed to think that in the process of re-writing over and over again, the product would improve. I don't think that was the case; NSC staffers reached the point where they couldn't read their own writing any more. Finally, because of time pressures, Kissinger would accept a draft.

Rhodesia, today's Zimbabwe, was my most frustrating problem at the NSC. The United States was importing Rhodesian chrome, notwithstanding a UN embargo on Rhodesia. While it was true that much of the world violated the embargo secretly, the US acted in the name of its own national security and a need for strategic materials like chrome. Powerful southern interests favored Rhodesia and, at the time, the Nixon Administration had a southern electoral strategy.

Other than Rhodesia, US policy toward African was generally thoughtful, carefully designed. It avoided becoming unnecessarily engaged in Africa but generally was quite friendly to Africa. Accusations that Nixon was a racist were nonsense. Once, at a prayer breakfast, attended by Zulu Chief Buthelezi of South Africa, I remember Nixon approaching the Chief and engaging him in a very warm conversation. The South African embassy was very surprised by the attention that the President had shown a black South African leader.

In the White House, I served as a coordinating point. I would receive all-source reporting on events in Africa and make sure that Dr. Kissinger and the President were apprised of

important developments. I moved a lot of paper from the Department to the President—although much of it was routine; e.g., birthday messages, national day messages.

The NSC during this time had the reputation of being a mini State Department within the government. It was alleged that Henry Kissinger had surrounded himself with the best and the brightest, making the regular bureaucracy less relevant. I knew, however, that I was not an authority on Africa. I knew that the NSC lacked real expertise in many areas. Kissinger knew very little about Africa; President Nixon knew more about Africa. The President was interested in the continent. There were people on the NSC staff who had their own beliefs about Africa. But from the very beginning, I think I worked effectively with the Department of State. I had good relations with the Assistant Secretary and various desks as well as the CIA. Whenever I was asked for some information, I could call the right person in the right agency and have what I required in very short order. I could then provide the President and the NSC Advisor with the best information available. In the case of CIA, I could call that agency and within 30 minutes I would have a an updated memorandum on the situation in Burundi, for example. I could speak with David Newsom, the Assistant Secretary of State, or the office directors or the desks; I could get their oral opinions, but I could not get a piece of paper out of the Department in short order; everything had to go through the Executive Secretariat which required all sorts of clearances. That would take a minimum of two days—if we were lucky. That I found quite disappointing; an assistant secretary would not be trusted to send some brief commentary to the White House directly. The Department, under conditions then and probably still today, cannot respond very quickly to White House requests. The CIA had an immediate response mechanism; that tended to have me rely more and more on its material. Of course, CIA did not comment on policy; it only provided the latest information. I did not have to reveal to Dr. Kissinger or Al Haig, the deputy NSC Advisor, where I got my information. It was my job to be the expert and they expected me to bring them good and timely information, regardless of source. I mention this process as an illustration of how ridiculous the fiction that we were independent was. I checked my information carefully;

sensitive issues were always discussed with Newsom—he would protect me and I would protect him. But I was always very careful. I know that some members of the Department —particularly at the top— exhibited jealously towards the NSC. Secretary Rogers allegedly issued instructions that no more Foreign Service officers were to be detailed to the NSC. Henry Kissinger very wisely surrounded himself with military and civilian officers who knew how to work their agencies. So I think we were getting the bureaucracy's best advice—even if we appeared to bypass the Secretary of State or his immediate staff. The executive secretary system is just not responsive; it is far too cumbersome and too concerned with form—margins, typographical errors, etc— rather than substance. I am not sure the Department understood that not all memos to the President or to the White House are in fact seen by the addressees. It is the staff which will be the primary consumers and is not concerned about how a document looks; what it says is much more important.

It was also a time when it was very, very difficult to get appointments for African leaders to meet with the President. There were almost no African state visits. I remember we finally got President Maga, of Dahomey (now Benin) an appointment. The Department of State prepared a three page briefing memorandum on the meeting. I boiled it down to one page hoping that the President would read it. Nixon was a very thorough man; it was hard to see him, but if he saw someone, he was fully prepared. So he read both the one-pager and three pager. When Maga met Nixon, the President discussed Dahomey's problems so knowledgeably that Maga was completely caught by surprise. He couldn't believe that the American President knew so much about his country's problems. Nixon did his homework and the visitor had his undivided attention once the meeting began. Unfortunately, access to the Oval Office was very limited.

The most difficult issue we confronted had to do with Burundi. The Hutus and Tutsis were having one of their battles—one of many. Thousands upon thousands of one tribe were being massacred by the government representing the other tribe. The African states didn't move a muscle; not a twitch. As far as they were concerned, the Hutu-Tutsi genocide was an “internal” issue. The administration was very critical of that position; it generated

great cynicism about African moral pronouncements. In the case of Burundi, someone had spoken to the President about the situation on the ground. That upset Nixon; he wanted to know what the Department was doing about the killings. Burundi became an issue. Our diplomacy took place behind the scenes and was not particularly effective. You have to remember that this was all before CNN; the atrocities in Burundi were not visibly documented for the American people. So Americans were not as outraged as they were to become when CNN brought vivid pictures into their living rooms. In the early 1970s there was very little news about Burundi. There was no question about the massacres; there was also no question that the world would do very little about them.

At the end of my tour, when I was assigned to Lima and John Negroponte was assigned to Quito, Evans and Novak, well known columnists, wrote a column suggesting that we had been “exiled.” That was pure hogwash! Lima, in fact, was an assignment that I had sought; I wanted out of Africa because I had been working on African affairs in Washington for three years—plus my previous field assignments. It was time to move on. So I went to Lima very happily; no one from Evans and Novak had ever asked me what I thought before they wrote the column. When it was published, I called the Office of Personnel, denying all that Evans and Novak had written and once again reaffirming my pleasure with the assignment. This was just one illustration of the continual stream of erroneous reporting about what was going on in the NSC that showed up in the press.

It is true that the NSC at the time was in somewhat of a turmoil because our Vietnam-Cambodia policies had led to well publicized resignations. But I was very pleased with my assignment to the NSC. The hours were extremely long; I would usually start about 7:30 a.m and not leave until 12 hours later. During working hours I was totally engaged in reading and writing about Africa. For the first two years, I had essentially no time to focus on anything else. It is true that periodically I would be invited to attend one of Kissinger's staff meetings. It was clear that Southeast Asia was one of Kissinger's main

preoccupations. I would learn more about what was happening in Vietnam at these staff meetings than from any other sources.

I was doing my best on African issues; I stuck to those and never strayed very far away from them. Personally, I was a “dove” on Vietnam, but that had nothing to do with my work. The only time I tried to change US policy while at the NSC was on Rhodesian sanctions, which I discussed earlier. I felt the US was violating international law; I believed I had an obligation as an NSC staffer to let my views on the issue be known. So I made the strongest pitch I could—quietly. While at a UN affairs conference, I received a personal call from Al Haig saying that my memorandum on Rhodesian sanctions had been read—I assume he meant by Henry Kissinger—and that the NSC leadership was fully aware of my views. Nevertheless, Haig said, because of our domestic southern electoral politics, the US could not change its position. It was not because Kissinger favored Zimbabwe; the concerns were strictly US domestic politics.

My views on Rhodesia were that embargoes do not tend to work. The embargo was placed on chrome, so Rhodesia had a very difficult time peddling its main export in the world markets. In fact, although it may have been difficult, many companies violated the embargo and bought chrome. So we had a case of governments officially supporting the sanctions while at the same time they allowed their companies to violate them with impunity. The US did not want to play that game. This is not to suggest that the US had a friendly relationship with Rhodesia; it did not.

Rhodesia was governed by Ian Smith and a white government. It had declared unilaterally its independence, but no country had officially recognized Rhodesia as an independent state. But the world traded surreptitiously with Rhodesia anyway, notwithstanding sanctions or any other legal efforts to embargo trade with that country. The Rhodesians used South Africa as their entry and exit avenue. But the issue was not very high on the world's agenda. It was a UN issue, but that body did not have the power to enforce an embargo, thanks in part to our “hands off” attitude.

Although Africa was changing, it is true that in my three years at the NSC nothing was changing in Rhodesia. South Africa was quiet as was most of the continent. So not much attention was given to Africa in Washington, as I have stated earlier. At the beginning of Nixon's second term, we were asked to submit a memorandum on any important issues in our areas of specialization which should be brought to the President's attention. The Portuguese empire in Africa was beginning to unravel; we could foresee problems arising in Portuguese Guinea with the likely ouster of the colonial occupying power. Portugal was a NATO ally; therefore we were reluctant to pressure Portugal on its African policies. Portugal was following a “stand fast” policy which was bound to be doomed. In my memorandum on issues worthy of Presidential attention, I highlighted this upcoming problem, predicting that problems would arise fairly soon. I suggested that more attention be paid to the dissolution of the Portuguese empire in Africa. My memo was returned to me with a snide remark to the effect that there was no interest at the higher NSC levels or Presidential levels on African affairs. Since this was near the end of my three years tour at the NSC, I just left the memo for my successor. Of course, soon after my departure the Portuguese issues did come to the forefront—e.g., the Cubans became involved in Angola with the US secretly supporting a rebellious group. So Angola was forced on Kissinger's agenda, but it could not get there until the events on the ground forced high level attention. My warning was not enough to get it there.

Kissinger was consumed entirely by East-West relations and Southeast Asia and China, as we later found out. There was so much going on in the world that almost no attention was devoted to Africa, or Latin America for that matter. Nevertheless, I had the responsibility of managing the African portfolio for the NSC— quietly and responsibly, which I tried to do. President Nixon cared a lot for one African leader—the Emperor of Ethiopia. That was because Haile Selassie had been kind to him when Nixon was out of power. So anything we did which might have affected Ethiopia we brought to the President's attention.

In the early 1970s, it was our policy to deny the Soviets a foothold on the African continent. That was not due to our desire to get involved in African affairs, but we preferred to keep all non-African powers out of there. We wanted Africa to develop on its own. The French and British were still very active in Africa, which was certainly also a barrier to Soviet penetration. In fact, the Soviets made almost no dent at all in Africa in this period. We did provide some assistance, but the early 1970s were not a period of American involvement in Africa.

I should mention that in the 1970-72 period, I only worked on Africa at the NSC. When Marshall Wright moved back to the Department to become a deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Congressional Relations his position was never filled. That left Mel Levine and myself to split the work of our office. By late 1972 Mel went on to another assignment and I was left as the Acting Director of the Office for African and International Organization Affairs. I remained as such for about a year. I am still amazed that I did all of this work by myself. What is notable, I think, is the fact that leaving the whole Office to me was clearly a sign of the amount of interest there was in our work in the upper echelon of the NSC . There was very, very little interest in the White House in Africa or the UN.

When George Bush was our UN Ambassador, I went to New York. The staff of the UN Mission was very close to Bush. Bush could get issues to the President; so there were minor things that could be done. Bush was replaced by John Scali, who did not have the warm personality of his predecessor. In fact, Scali had very little cache in the White House and UN issues were returned to the very back-burner. Periodically there would be a major issue on the Security Council's agenda. For example, in 1973, an Arab-Israeli issue arose. The US faced the prospect of casting its second veto. This all came up on a Sunday. We knew that unless the resolution was not amended, we would cast that veto. I went to the Situation Room in the White House and monitored events in New York very closely. Scali could not get a change in the wording of the resolution, so that at the end of the day we did cast a veto.

I went to see Henry Kissinger who was with Al Haig to inform them that the veto had been cast. As I was leaving, Haig said, “Fred, sorry we had to spoil your Sunday.” I will always remember Haig's kind thought. It had been one of those long Sundays; everyone at the NSC front office had been working, but Haig was kind enough to acknowledge my contribution. That is not something that Henry Kissinger would have done.

In the early 1970s, Agnew was the Vice President. I don't remember him ever being involved in any foreign affairs issues. I would occasionally see him in the elevator and he would nod to me. As far as I was concerned—and I think this was true for the rest of the NSC staff as well—Agnew was a name on a door.

Nixon, on the other hand, was fully engaged in foreign affairs. Our memos did go to him; Nixon liked to sit in his office in the Executive Office building so that he could read our material as well as that coming from the Cabinet departments and agencies. We were quite certain that he read our prose.

While I was at the NSC, Mrs. Nixon took a trip to Africa which was very successful. She worked well with the NSC staff. Although I did not go on the trip, I remember well how easy she was to work with.

Despite the lack of interest in my work, my morale was always high while at the NSC. It was the center of power; whatever a staffer did, even if not very significant in Kissinger's eyes, was nevertheless more important than whatever else she or he might have done in other parts of the bureaucracy. So it gave me satisfaction to work at the NSC.

Q: In 1973, you were assigned to Peru. How did that come about?

RONDON: My wife and I attended President Nixon's Inaugural Ball in January 1973; all NSC staffers were invited and we went together. It was an optimistic period. There was confidence that the Vietnam agony would be ended soon. There was considerable esprit

de corps among the NSC staffers at the time. But as 1973 wore on and my tour at the NSC was coming to an end, the Watergate scandal began to intrude seriously.

Before leaving the NSC, I had been asked whether I would be interested in an appointed position in the second Nixon administration. I was told that if I accepted such an appointment, I would have to resign from the Foreign Service. I was not ready to leave the Foreign Service; I liked my career.

I was upset by what was going on around me. I had met some of the people who were allegedly involved in the Watergate affair. I was surprised by the continual revelations. The White House—not the President, but his men: Haldeman, Ehrlichman, etc— distrusted the NSC. For example, the NSC staff was not allowed to eat in the White House mess, except as guests of someone who had the privilege. The NSC staff was not a “political” staff; we were professionals of both Republican and Democratic persuasions. The Foreign Service officers understood that they had to deal with all different points of views. That caused us to be distrusted. We were concerned by this highly partisan atmosphere because it could have isolated the President; that is, he might only receive one point of view from his Republican staff. So I was fully aware of the chasm between the political operatives in the White House and myself.

All of these factors led me to turn down the opportunity for a Presidential appointment and I proceeded to go to Peru. It was a difficult transition for some one who had attended Henry Kissinger's staff meetings and then found himself as the number two man in the Political Section—which did not make me eligible to attend the Ambassador's staff meetings. That was a downer.

I had an autographed picture of President Nixon which I had hung in my office in Lima. It was there on Saturday night when the “massacre” took place—Eliot Richardson's resignation. The picture came down quietly and I put it in a trunk, where it still rests. It was

very sad that a President, who had shown such extraordinary foreign affairs skills, had broken US domestic laws as Nixon had.

When I arrived in Peru in 1973, the country was run by a military junta. I was able to use my skills to the fullest; I was bilingual. I prepared some of the best reporting I had ever done as a Foreign Service officer. This was a time when a number of American academics were praising the Peruvian revolution because the Peruvian military had initiated land reform and were empowering the poor. In contrast, the Peruvian upper class had always been insensitive to the needs of the majority of the Peruvians. Now the government was run supposedly by “good” military who were making things right for the poor. That was a crock!

In fact, the Peruvian military were fascists. They had mobilized the peasants; they were creating all sorts of committees at the grass roots. If you were a farmer or a worker, you belonged to an organization. These organizations were then stacked up in sort of pyramid, with the military being on top. We recognized and supported the need for reform in the country's economic structure. We were certainly not anxious to have Peru follow in Cuba's footsteps. So we didn't have too great a concern for the Junta's economic program, except for expropriation.

The military were engaged in a major effort to destroy any power center that might have given it competition. The officers were enriching themselves. They tried to develop a political system which would perpetuate their rule as long as possible. In general, military do not run countries very well; they lack an understanding of economics and other dynamics. It was therefore not surprising the original Peruvian junta was thrown out, first by internal coups and then by the return of democratic rule in 1980. The downfall was basically caused by economic deprivation. Production fell too catastrophically. My views on Peruvian fascism or corporativism were strongly criticized by some American academics. My reports were unclassified because I felt that views other than those circulated by academics should be made available to the American public. I did it quietly,

coldly letting the facts speak for themselves. The Embassy was very supportive of my work.

The Peruvian military in my days was buying Soviet military equipment; I think it was the first Latin American country to do so after Cuba. That was not welcomed by us. In fact, the Soviet-Peru relationship was much closer than we would have liked to see it. So we had a difficult relationship with Peru in the early 1970s.

My portfolio was essentially to cover the civilian population of Peru—and Lima particularly. I was especially interested in those who opposed military rule. That was very interesting. My territory covered largely the political parties; I had very good contacts with the press and the middle class. In view of my grade, I did not deal with the military leadership nor cabinet officers. I knew some, socially, but had no official contact with them.

There was a lot of opposition to the military; I remember a bomb being detonated near our house, at the home of a naval officer who lived near by. We were awakened by the explosion. On another occasion, the police rebelled against the army in a futile effort; the only result was the death of some people. So there was a lot political unrest. But we generally had good personal relationships with Peruvians; they were friendly. Most of the Peruvians I dealt with wanted President Belaunde, who had been ousted in 1968, to return. Eventually, he was re-elected, although quite along in years by that time and in many ways out of touch with Peru as it had moved since his days in power. But he was elected, to the discredit of the leftist candidates who were viewed as the step-children of the Junta. It was clear by the time I left that eventually Accion Popular (Belaunde's Party) would win an election when a fair and open one was held.

The Ambassador dealt with the Junta, with which he had a pretty good relationship. Ambassador Toby Belcher spoke excellent Spanish; he also had a good sense humor. President Velasco had a strong personality and the two seemed to enjoy their dialogue, even when they concerned issues on which the US and Peru differed. So we had the

Ambassador dealing at the highest levels, the Political Counselor with the cabinet and high party officials and me, as number two in the Political Section, relating to the second tier of the governmental and political structure. I got to know a lot of people, which enabled me to do a lot of reporting.

It was during Belcher's term that Soviet tanks were delivered. That came as a shock to us.We went about our business while trying to convince the Peruvians to change their ways. We were not willing to sell them the weapons they wanted, but the Soviets were only too happy to do so at very cheap prices. The delivery of the tanks caused a crisis because it upset the balance of power in that part of the world and forced us to confront the question of what we would do in case a Peru-Chile war broke out with Peru using Soviet equipment. Would we have to come to the assistance of a military government in Chile that we found unsavory, to say the least? So we worked very hard to reduce the possibility of conflict. Furthermore, we were concerned that the delivery of Soviet military equipment would increase Russian influence in Peru.

It should be said that the Chilean military always had the reputation of being a significant fighting force—at least in that part of the world. The Peruvians did not have that reputation. Furthermore, the Peruvian military was very involved in the management of Peru; almost every general had a high ranking position—cabinet officers, etc. So the military leadership was busy on many fronts. Of course, we did not have major relationships with the military —no military assistance program, very few sales. So we were not in a very good position to assess Peruvian tactical abilities; nevertheless, we took them seriously and as I said were concerned that they might take some aggressive steps, particularly after receiving the Soviet tanks.

The economic situation was also interesting. This was a time when leftist economic experiments were taking place; they were doomed to fail. For example, in the farm areas, the old landlords were thrown out and replaced by cooperatives. The peasants took over the haciendas, which they used to work. Sound economic theory would have permitted

those peasants to work those fields; if they were successful, they would make money. If they weren't successful, they would go broke. But that was not the Peruvian military plan. It wanted the successful cooperatives to support the less successful ones. That of course immediately eliminated the incentive to be successful since the fruit of success would be passed on to others. Incentives were being eliminated from the Peruvian economic system, which was mindless and was bound to doom the Peruvian experiment as it did. By the end of my tour, Peru's economic situation was beginning to fray badly; the days of that Junta were numbered.

There was, of course, the problem of expropriation. The Peruvian “revolution” started in 1968 at which time the military expropriated the holdings of the IPC (International Petroleum Company). The military considered this a great conquest. But we insisted on compensation for our companies. By the time I arrived, this issue had poisoned relationships for five years; that situation would continue until there was a settlement towards the end of my tour. These negotiations were the responsibility of the economic section; I was not really involved and didn't have to report on them.

While in Lima, we lived through a very bad earthquake. I prompted a quick report to the Department. There was relief that no members of the Embassy had been injured. Ham radios had reported that Lima had been destroyed by a terrible earthquake. It was quite a violent event, but no Americans were hurt, as far as I can remember.

I should mention that the Peruvian military had long held a grudge against Chile. Peru had lost large parts of territory in a war that ended in 1881— the War of the Pacific. Peruvian cadets would salute each other saying, “Viva Peru! Muera Chile!” or, “Long live Peru! Death to Chile!” The Peruvians wanted to arm to the teeth—against Chile. There was always a debate whether President Juan Velasco would attack Chile. He was known as a gutsy individual. While the Peruvian military as a whole might have been cautious, there was always a chance that Velasco might act rashly. I think there was a real chance of that. He was in ill health towards the end of my tour; so there never was an attack. But we were

concerned. In fact, I had to spend a week in Washington working on a contingency paper in case Peru took any rash actions. Pinochet had come in power in 1973; in fact, because of the leftist tendencies of the pre-Pinochet Chilean government, relations between Peru and Chile were not bad. The Pinochet regime was a government of the right; that was the opposite direction from that which the Peruvian government considered itself. I don't know what effect Pinochet's advent had on Peruvian territorial ambitions; I suspect that Velasco's health was a greater restraining factor. Even so, I could not say that the Peruvians would have attacked Chile. We did know that Peru was greatly enhancing its military capabilities and Chile was the only possible target in the neighborhood.

Peru at the time had strong ties to Castro. Castro was a hero to the Peruvian masses. President Velasco of Peru liked to be known as a friend of Castro's. That further heightened our unhappiness and concern. Events in Chile—the overthrow of Allende—had been traumatic to Peru. The contingency paper I mentioned earlier was essentially designed to prevent an outbreak of hostilities between Peru and Chile—regardless of the tendencies of either government. We just didn't want to see hostilities break out anywhere in Latin America. Peru had other border problems but there were no current tensions on the Ecuadorian border. The last war between Peru and Ecuador had ended in 1942 and the United States was one of the guarantors of the peace under the 1942 Rio Protocol.

Peru had extended its territorial waters to the 200 mile limit. Tuna boat seizures did not take place during my tenure, but we did not recognize Peru's unilateral extension of jurisdiction. Our ships and aircraft used these waters freely, although we never wandered into the recognized twelve mile zone. We were not trying to provoke a response, but, as I said, we did not recognize the new territorial limits—which in any case, the Peruvians could not enforce. I mention the territorial issue as an illustration of a series of thorny issues we had with Peru in the early-mid 1970s. We had a very active Embassy covering a lot of contentious issues.

Belcher was replaced by Robert Dean in 1974. Relationships during Dean's early term were fairly quiet because the expropriation issue was a freshly settled problem.

While in Lima, I was promoted. This resulted in a welcome curtailment of my three year tour to two. I went to the National War College in August 1975.

Q: As you said, in 1975 you were assigned to the War College. I would think this was an interesting time to be there, in light of our withdrawal from Vietnam. What was your impression of the state of mind of your military classmates?

RONDON: I sought the War College assignment. I had always wanted to go there. When I was in the Army in 1962 I did not develop a great deal of respect for the officers I dealt with; they seemed on the whole to be “90 day wonders” and the “Beetle Bailey Lt. Fuzz” types. Some were regular army; the rest were in the military for a limited period of time; neither gave me much confidence. On the other hand, the sergeants were of an entirely different quality. If I were to go into battle, I would certainly have followed the sergeants; I would not have wanted to rely on the officers. The sergeants, with long years of military experience, knew what they were doing; the officers had attended college and were only cosmetically in charge.

While at the War College, I car-pooled with five colonels. We became very close. My class consisted of 140 students—35 from civilian agencies and 35 from each of the three services. I found all of my military classmates to be absolutely first rate. I left the War College with an enormous respect for the quality of the colonels. I also felt very strongly that the service which had its feet on the ground (pun intended) and was the most realistic was the Army. It was the most mature, practical service of the three, based on my observations during that one year at the War College. I found the Air Force officers to be very bright, young, and sometimes immature. The Marines answered a call of their own; they tended to be long in the tooth. The Navy seemed a service a little “out of it”; the submariners being the most “out of it.” I realize that I am making dangerous

generalizations and there were many exceptions to my conclusions. I got very close to my military colleagues. It was fantastic experience.

One of my most vivid memories was the election of 1976. Everyone was certain that Ford would win. The military wanted Ford to win. But in conversations with military families who had been stationed on bases throughout the US, I found out that the sentiment was that Carter would win. So we had a classical split: the Washington crowd was betting on Ford; the “grass roots” thought it would be Carter. That brought to my attention that Washington was not a very good barometer of public sentiment. In general, because 1976 was an election year, we tended to avoid domestic political issues—except for the recent Nixon demise, which we did discuss often.

We had retired military officers who would attend classes from time to time. They were concerned about the US military. They thought that there was something wrong with our military after Vietnam. They would audit the classes from the back row. After attending these sessions for a number of days, I think they went away reassured that the current officers were outstanding individuals. In the era immediately after Vietnam, I came to blame the civilian political class for prolonging the war and splitting America.

When we held war games, the civilians were always the first to want to use nuclear weapons. The military were always more cautious. We had incredible briefings on atomic and nuclear power. That was an eye-opener; it was shocking. The devastation that those weapons could cause was unbelievable. That fact never seized my imagination as it did at the War College. The men and women who had their fingers on the triggers had no desire to use them; they understood the havoc that those weapons could create. So I was very reassured by what I saw and heard on this subject.

I didn't find any signs of low morale among my colleagues—Vietnam notwithstanding. There were stories about the problems of wearing a uniform; people in uniforms were sometimes spat upon. But my classmates were proud officers—proud to serve their

country. Of course, they were the cream of the crop; they were on their way to more senior positions. I must say that Vietnam was not a major topic of discussion. I think I understood why we had gotten involved in that country, but I did not understand why it had been so difficult for us to get out much earlier. I think many of the military had the same view, but they of course had to follow orders. Furthermore, the agony of Vietnam had lasted for such a long time that, when it was finished, not much attention was paid to it in relief of the immediate aftermath.

Subjects discussed at length with the military concerned the military and power, military governments, and why the American military was different from that of other countries. Most of my military classmates were married and had children. They wanted their children to grow up in a society where they could make their own choices. That was our civilian society which they prized and they were willing to give up their lives to defend it. That was the best answer I could ask for.

They were worried about competitiveness. That was not a word very much in use in 1976—it is a 1990s buzz word. They worried about US ability to project enough power to stay ahead of the Soviet Union. That was the competition and it was a matter of great concern to my military classmates. The military wanted to project real strength. They perceived that the US was under a severe threat; it was their role to counter that threat. Many of our lectures dealt with that issue.

The military and the civilians go to the War College to expand their horizons. We didn't study war. We studied our own society, which was very important to the military.

We did talk about the role of the military in Peru and I gave my opinions. We discussed the role of military in our society. We discussed how foreign military organizations sometimes go wrong in their countries. Our officers knew what their role was in American society.

Watergate was the dominant domestic issue of the day. We discussed what had gone wrong and how power corrupts. We had a very impressive briefing by Alexander

Butterfield, a colonel who was President Nixon's appointments secretary and who was the first to divulge the existence of the Oval Office tapes which recorded conversations that had taken place in the President's office. He came to the War College and talked to us off-the-record. He was talking to people essentially of his age and rank who might be assigned to work in the White House. He talked about the heady atmosphere of working in the White House and the effect of power on an individual. It was one of the most honest, sobering presentations we had that year.

Q: After you graduated in 1976, you were assigned to the Bureau for American Republic Affairs (ARA). How did that come about?

RONDON: I wanted the job of Deputy Director, Office of East Coat Affairs in the Latin America Bureau. That office covered Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay. I managed to get that assignment and was there from 1976 to 1978.

I think those two years were probably the toughest I had in my career. My hours were incredibly long. I devoted most of my time to Argentina. There had been a coup there in 1973; by the time I got to ARA, the violence in Argentina had become almost incredible. The Carter administration came into power pushing a human rights platform. The first target was Argentina. When Pat Derian, the Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, took her first trip to Argentina I went with her as her ARA escort. I will never forget that first trip. I did care for human rights. I think I had something to do with saving some Argentines —at least some people who got out have given me credit. Pat knew this history; so she knew that I supported pressure on the Argentine military to relieve their repressive regime. On the other hand, I worked for Terry Todman, who was the Assistant Secretary. The Bureau was trying to maintain a relationship with Argentina. Our policy was not based on whether we approved or disapproved of the Argentine government. ARA did not accept the thesis that a single issue should govern all relationships with a particular country; there were other issues that had to be discussed with Argentina. Furthermore, Argentina was being subjected to a double standard; our policy toward other countries in the world took

into account other concerns besides human rights. No other bilateral relationship was governed by a single issue as was ours with Argentina. Derian, of course, had a real edge. It was hard to argue for a balanced policy when Derian was on the side of the angels; no one could deny the validity of her concerns. Pat Derian had one goal and one goal only; she never hid her agenda. Despite her single-mindedness, Derian was very gracious; it was almost impossible not to like her. I never felt any tension in my dealings with her.

On that first trip, we started in El Salvador, whose president was Colonel Romero. I was serving as interpreter. I will never forget Derian telling the Colonel that he should not use thumb-screws on his political prisoners. I didn't know the Spanish word for “thumb-screws” so I said: “...the rings you put around a prisoner's fingers and then twist them.” The Colonel said, “I understand.”

Then we went on to Panama to visit the School of the Americas. There had been allegations that in that school, run by US military, torture techniques had been taught. There were a lot of nonsensical stories, but Derian wanted to make sure that the commandant and his staff understood the absolute need to be careful. Then I think we went to Bolivia. La Paz was 13,000 feet high and we were advised to take it easy for the first 24 hours so our bodies could become acclimated to the altitude. Pat didn't want that; she wanted to go to the prisons immediately—jails which held 40 or 50 Americans—mostly on narcotics charges. We were trying to negotiate an arrangement to allow those prisoners to serve the rest of their sentences in US jails. On the first afternoon, we went to the Panoptico Prison. It was terrible. Young Americans were essentially put in caves. They all begged Pat to help them. I will never forget the faces of those Americans. In some cases, they looked like shells. There were some very pretty girls there, but they looked hollow. Narcotics and the jail had robbed them of their vitality and acumen; that vision haunted Pat and the rest of us. That night she came down with a huge headache and wanted to be evacuated from Bolivia immediately—she thought she was going to die. Of course, it was impossible to fly out of La Paz at night, but the next day we did go down to Santa Cruz where we visited more prisoners. The lower altitude helped her feel better. She had

enough stamina left to fight tooth and nail for the release of those Americans to American prisons. I think that the Bolivia visit was the most traumatic part of our trip because we dealt with human beings with whom we had been personally in touch. In fact, Derian had been interested for a long time in prison reform—for her, prison reform was part of the human rights issue.

Then we went on to Argentina. That was physically pleasant—Buenos Aires is a fun city. The conversations with the Argentine military were deadly serious. I served as interpreter for Patt; I knew the interpreter for the Argentine Minister for Interior—he had served in Washington at the Argentine Embassy. We were sitting across the table from each other. I will never forget the moment during the conversation when Pat and the Minister seemed about to come to blows. They seemed about ready to stand up to trade blows when both interpreters put their hands on their respective boss' shoulders; it was an instinctive reflex action by both of us to try to stop matters before they really got out of hand. Then the conversation continued. I must say that Derian was not afraid to call “a spade a spade”; she was very clear about her views—even to the point of being undiplomatic. There was no question about her dedication to human rights.

Our policy demanded that we cease selling any military items, including even items that were related to basic safety. I remember that a Argentine War College class came to Washington on its annual trip and I met with them. Shortly thereafter the commander of the War College was assassinated by leftist terrorists. I wrote a letter of condolence. It was our policy to condemn violence regardless of whether it came from the right or the left. In Argentina, innocents were being killed or maimed by the violence. I must say that the Argentine military behaved so atrociously that they drove us to accept human rights goals as our sole policy objective for Argentina.

Earlier, I discussed the military in Peru which had leftist tendencies. The Argentine military was of a very conservative nature. The Peruvian military had early support from the lower classes because it had income redistribution as part of its policy. In Argentina, under the

Peronists, the country had been in a state of anarchy. On the first day of class, Buenos Aires University students were divided up: half would go to the Montoneros—the Peronist terrorist group—and the other half to the ERP (the Popular Revolutionary Army)—a more Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. These were 17-18 year old kids, both boys and girls. They did not become terrorists right off the bat; they were used according to their proclivities. The administration of the largest university in Argentina was splitting its freshmen between two terrorists groups.

Argentina was obviously sinking into a morass, so when the military stepped in, it had a lot of popular support. But then the military set out to “purify” society—using its own definition of “purity.” That led to incredible excesses. The military became monsters. I interviewed one young American girl who had lived in Buenos Aires. I promised to keep the conversation private, so I cannot reveal the name. In any case, she told me that the Argentinean military had broken into her house, had placed a hood over her face and she was taken away to some place where she was tortured. Afterward, the hood was taken off, presumably an indication that she would be killed and therefore it didn't make any difference whether she observed her surroundings. One day, the hood was put back on. That was the signal that her life had been spared. The American was expelled and eventually spoke me.

I knew two other individuals who also had been kidnaped. I found it intolerable that 17-18 year old kids who sometimes unwittingly became part of terrorist groups were being systematically eliminated. It was terrible. The Catholic Church would complain; priests would then be murdered. The military would brook no opposition—from any quarter. The country was seized by terrorism. I went there five or six times in those two years. I feared there was no redemption for Argentina. Our relationships deteriorated steadily because of the military's human rights violations.

Later, after I had served in Honduras, I returned to Washington to become the Director of the Office of Andean Affairs. In that capacity, I escorted the Deputy Secretary on a tour of

Latin America. We visited Argentina and he was invited to visit the Argentine Congress. I never dreamed in the late 1970s that I would ever see an Argentine Congress, much less one than was functioning in the best democratic traditions. I didn't believe I would ever see that day after the horrible period Argentina had gone through in the 1960s and 1970s.

I remember that when President Alfonsin was inaugurated in 1983, one of the invited guests was Pat Derian. The civilians had remembered that she had fought for their freedom starting in 1977. It had been in many ways a one person crusade—lonely perhaps—but not forgotten by Argentine democrats, who acknowledged their gratitude by inviting her to the inauguration. There was a sense that the US had clearly stood up for democracy in Argentina's darkest hours.

I think that, in general, the Department of State was not prepared for a Bureau of Human Rights headed by a person with a personality as strong as Pat Derian's. She could be a very disruptive force in our bilateral relations with Latin American countries. She was focused on human rights violations; in her view there were no balancing factors. In ARA, she and her views carried the day.

I must say that at times I felt caught between Derian and Todman. I respected both. Todman was more formal and I was closer to Patt, particularly since I traveled with her. As I said, I devoted almost all of my time to Argentine affairs. I fully agreed with Derian that the regime in charge of Argentina was less than human. I did argue for a more balanced policy but I didn't mind losing battles to HR; there was not much I could or would say in defense of the Argentine regime. As I suggested earlier, when she was invited to the Alfonsin inauguration, it was clear that she had been right. I don't think she ever dreamed that Alfonsin would invite her, particularly since she represented a President long out of power and was a member of a political party that did not occupy the White House. Many questions were asked why she was invited. And the answer was, at least in part, that through her efforts civilian rule was reestablished in Argentina. There must also have been

the thought that fewer civilians, including perhaps even Alfonsin himself, were murdered because of her interventions. Derian was ultimately vindicated.

I was at first expected to be a deputy office director and Argentine desk officer. Eventually we got an Argentine desk officer because the work load that Argentina generated was just too much for one person. Any time an American got into trouble in Argentina, his family or firm would contact a member of Congress and then the issue would land in our laps. There were several high profile human rights cases which attracted the attention of Congress, so we were very busy almost every day producing replies to Congressional letters. It was a stressful two years.

Q: Then in 1978, you were assigned to Honduras? What was your job?

RONDON: I became the Deputy Chief of Mission of our Embassy in Tegucigalpa. I felt it was time for me to get managerial experience. ARA supported me in my desire to become a DCM, but Personnel objected—they thought I was still too junior. They tried to persuade Ambassador Mari-Luci Jaramillo that they had more seasoned candidates than Rondon. But the Ambassador, having talked to me, stood behind my selection.

My wife was a great help to me at this time. Mari-Luci was married; her husband did not fit in too well as a dependent because most of the organizations in Tegucigalpa were designed for the female spouses of ambassadors. Mari-Luci did not have the time to be both the ambassador and the Embassy's “first spouse.” While we were still in Washington, the Ambassador discussed her problems with my wife. My wife was quite sympathetic and willing to support Mari-Luci as best she could. I suspect my wife's willingness to play the role of “first spouse” had as much to do with my getting the DCM job as anything else. That may not sound exactly right these days, but it is the truth.

Ambassador Jaramillo had been in Tegucigalpa for about a year when her DCM was reassigned. I had heard good things about her work and therefore threw my hat into the ring. Todman spoke highly of Jaramillo as did Wade Matthews, the Central America

Country Director. She had been an unknown quantity to the Department when she was appointed. In fact, she turned out to be a first rate ambassador. I was delighted when she selected me to be her DCM.

Mari Luci Jaramillo is a Chicana—from New Mexico. She had been nominated by the Carter administration. She spoke Spanish, of course. She had been a respected educator at the University of New Mexico. She served the administration's political purposes by being both Mexican-American and a woman. She was the first Chicana to be named as an ambassador. The word “Chicano” is used to describe a person of Mexican origins, although I have never used it for myself, even though my mother was Mexican. It is word that came into vogue about twenty years ago.

At the time, it seemed like a strange appointment. Honduras was run by a junta of colonels who had a reputation for alcoholism. The question was why we were sending a teetotaler to be ambassador to hard drinking colonels.

I think I might add a few words about the “male” bastion that the Honduras regime was. The head of the Junta did not want a female ambassador to call on him regularly at the palace. He thought that he should call on her at her residence. Mari-Luci said that if that was what the General wanted, it was fine with her. So the General would often visit the residence and meet with the Ambassador for an hour or so. They would discuss whatever business there was to take up and then would go to shoot pool with the Ambassador's husband. The other members of the Junta picked this up and began to do the same thing. The Ambassador, very sensibly, thought if the regime's leaders were more comfortable with that process, she would certainly go along. By the time, I got to Honduras, the Colonels had warmed up to her and would tell her virtually everything that was happening in Honduras. Being a teacher, Jaramillo was a good listener and knew how to get the best out of her interlocutors. So, in fact, a bond was developed between the Honduran military and our Ambassador.

When I got to Honduras in 1978, the country was very peaceful; not much of great moment was going on. It was caught between Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, all of which had strong governments. There was considerable violence in El Salvador and Guatemala. Honduras was the poor cousin in Central America; no one paid much attention to it. Honduran society did not have much of an elite upper class, so there were no great societal tensions. In fact, Honduras was best known for its tranquility—a backwater. We could travel throughout the country safely; there were no guards at the banks. It was just a very pleasant atmosphere with some very nice people.

The military Junta—the Colonels— that ran Honduras consisted of professional officers who had attended the military academy and had worked their way through the ranks. Each took his turn in power. Had there not been a threat from Nicaragua, there may not have been elections and the Junta might still be in power. The military officers became quite wealthy; being in government was a profitable enterprise.

In 1979, the Nicaraguan government was overthrown, with the Sandinistas taking charge from Somoza. Some remnants of the Somoza national guard fled into Honduras, changing the atmosphere in that country almost overnight. Terrorism, from both the left and the right, became common place. Bank robberies became a phenomenon. Our residence had no wall around it; within six month after the Nicaraguan invasion, a twelve foot iron fence was erected around our place. The whole atmosphere in Honduras changed overnight.

This was also the time during which the Carter administration was making major efforts to get along with the Sandinistas. The US did not want to be accused of having pushed the Nicaraguan government any further to the left than it already was. We wanted to give the Sandinistas a chance, now that they were in power, to govern more from the center and to allow a more democratic form of government to evolve. There was sympathy in Washington with the Somoza overthrow; he ran a repressive regime which was not palatable to the Carter administration.

At about this time, the FMLN in El Salvador was becoming a force to be reckoned with. It appeared that the moment had arrived for the left to sweep Central America. The question was which country would be next to succumb to “leftist” fever. All of the sudden the US had to become concerned about Honduras' stability and its security. There were members of some of the leading families in Honduras who were becoming concerned about their future. They were lining up at our Embassy to get their visas in case they had to flee their country. So Honduras went from being the peaceful and harmonious country that it had been to another Central American cauldron. It suddenly counted for the US.

US pressure on the Paz government increased. Ambassador Jaramillo discharged her brief very carefully; she avoided lecturing the Junta. She tried to explain that the US-Honduras relationship would be greatly strengthened if the Junta were to move to a more democratic system. In fact, that development did start and the Ambassador did not have to be very critical of the Junta and the military because they themselves were moving in the right direction.

At the same time, there were disturbing signs about Honduran society. People were beginning to disappear; arms were flowing through Honduras to El Salvador. The US Congress passed an amendment barring assistance to Nicaragua if it was found to be a shipper of arms. Eventually, Nicaragua violated the letter of the law. The Carter administration was most reluctant to invoke the amendment. There was a feeling that to suspend assistance was premature, even if the law was being violated. The administration wanted more time for discussion to see whether the US could convince the Junta to stop the arms flow to El Salvador.

Unfortunately, the USG was not successful. We reported truthfully what was happening in Honduras. I know our reporting made Washington uncomfortable. It was about that time when the administration decided to “promote” Jaramillo to be a deputy assistant secretary in ARA. It named a more experienced practitioner as ambassador, in part because there seemed to be a desire in Washington to play a more artful game in Honduras that

would impact on Nicaragua as well. As I said, Jaramillo was very truthful about events in Honduras. She was concerned about the security threat to Honduras and was able to get US military assistance increased.

I don't think Washington wanted to hear anything about possible Nicaraguan violations of US law. We were receiving evidence of arm shipments to El Salvador. The facts as we reported them would have required the imposition of sanctions on Nicaragua.

I thought that the Carter administration wanted to bury its head in the sand with respect to the revolutionary intentions of the Sandinistas. However, Congress wanted to tie the administration's hands, thereby eliminating any possibility of exploring whether the Sandinistas could be weaned away from their hard line revolutionary positions. In fact, I don't think that it would have been possible to do that, but Congress barred any possibility of exploring that avenue.

Human right violations in Honduras was not a major issue during my two years there. The issues of torture and disappearances was just beginning as I left. Our number one priority in the field of human rights was to convince the Junta to hold free and democratic elections. In fact, the country was proceeding in that direction. The Ambassador spent most of her last year holding the hands of the center/left—the liberals—who did not believe that the Junta would allow elections or if it did, they would not be fair ones. But elections were held; they were free and fair and both liberals and conservatives celebrated the outcome in the streets of Tegucigalpa—some cried joyfully.

American business was not a political factor in Honduras during the 1978-80 period. US investment assisted Honduras with its balance of payments—e.g. export of bananas managed by United Brands and Standard Fruit. The Embassy had good relations with United Fruit, which by 1978, had changed considerably. It was no longer the monopolistic giant that ran governments in its heyday. By 1978, United Brands was a respected,

well run American company which operated in Central America as a responsible private enterprise.

In the years after my departure, under the Reagan administration, Honduras became a bastion in Central America—or rather it became a fortified camp as we poured more and more military material into that country.

Q: In 1980, you were appointed as US Ambassador to Madagascar. How did thacome about?

RONDON: I was surprised when I was asked whether I would be interested in the job. The inquiry came to me telephonically. I said that I would certainly be interested. I was told that it would probably take at least six months before an agr#ment could be approved because US- Madagascar relations at the time were not very good. In fact, about five months after I had left Madagascar during my earlier tour, the Ambassador and five Embassy staff members were declared persona non grata. The same thing happened two or three years later with another two Americans being declared p.n.g. Between 1975 and 1980, our Embassy had been run by a Charg#.

But in 1980, Madagascar began to hint that it would like to upgrade relationships with the US through mutual appointments of ambassadors. Washington agreed. The Department decided to nominate someone who knew something about Madagascar. In fact, agr#ment was given within 48 hours. Interestingly enough, during my first tour, I had developed good contacts with the Embassy's national employees and some of them remembered me and spoke well of me when my name was first mentioned as a possible ambassadorial candidate. Through their contacts with the government, I think, our national employees were very helpful not only in getting agr#ment, but getting it quickly. A lesson from that experience is that a young officer should cultivate good contacts in the country of assignment if he or she wishes to return sometime later as ambassador.

In 1972 Madagascar had experienced a second revolution during which an admiral, Didier Ratsiraka, was chosen to be President. He decided that his government would be a leftist one. Madagascar is the only example that I can think of where the United States failure in Vietnam may have led a foreign leader to think that the triumph of communism was the writing on the wall. I believe the story that Didier Ratsiraka came to the conclusion that the future of Madagascar depended on an alliance or close friendship with the Soviets rather than the Americans. He further decided that Madagascar's best friend should be North Korea. They built presidential palace for him. However, Madagascar, which had been an exporter of rice, became an importer because Ratsiraka's leftist government destroyed the distribution system. The incompetent North Koreans were brought in to give advice on rice cultivation. The North Koreans sent military conscripts to advise Malagasy farmers who knew much more about rice cultivation than their “advisors.” Ratsiraka was a stubbornly proud man and would not admit that he had made a major mistake in throwing his lot in with North Korean and the Soviet Union.

The Soviets had a large presence in Madagascar. There was a Communist Party on the island which was close to the Soviets. The Cubans were very popular; their ambassador was a well liked figure. The Cuban had a great sense of humor; he was also the dean of the diplomatic corps. That presented a problem for me. I had to go to the Cuban Embassy a couple of times when the Ambassador was hosting a diplomatic function as dean of the corps. He could not come to the American Embassy; there was absolutely no reason for him to be there, just as I never went to his Embassy on bilateral business. Occasionally, we did speak together—in Spanish. As I said, he was very bright and engaging. But we never discussed ideology or Cuban-American issues. He was succeeded by a humorless ambassador who quickly lost all of the good will that his predecessor had garnered.

The US was willing to become engaged again with Madagascar primarily because we wanted to deny the Soviets a free hand on the island, especially the port facilities at Diego

Suarez. We didn't want the Soviet navy using that bay; it would have been a great base for them.

The Department of State didn't have any great illusions about Madagascar. One of the ranking members of the Bureau of African affairs (AF) was opposed to sending an ambassador at all, in light of Madagascar's previous behavior. But the administration did want to normalize relationships with Madagascar. I was treated well. Slowly but surely relationship were rebuilt. By 1980, the Malagasy were withdrawing from the courtship of the Soviets.

My favorite anecdote of my tour actually came even before I left for Madagascar—during my Washington briefing period. I was invited by Duke University to visit its primate center. I went with my twelve year old daughter Susan, who was born in Madagascar during our first tour there, and my wife, Marian. The Director, Dr. Elwyn Simons, took us to see the animals. Duke has one of the most important lemur breeding programs in the US. Many lemur species are endangered. Dr. Simons introduced us to a propithecus lemur whose name was Nigel—a beautiful animal. When Simons gave the lemur to Susan to hold, Nigel embraced her. Dr. Simons then noted that, unfortunately, Nigel would never have off-spring because no mate was available. Then came the suggestion that I could be very helpful in facilitating Duke's search for a mate for Nigel. As far as Susan was concerned, the finding of a mate for Nigel in Madagascar was my sole purpose as ambassador.

I spent my first year becoming re-acquainted with Madagascar—talking to people, getting around the island, etc. The government was run by coastal people but the bureaucracy consisted primarily of highland people. As I mentioned in my previous discussion of Madagascar, the coastal people and the highlanders are racially different. Although the country has 18 tribes, most outsiders just divide the country between the highlanders—of Malayo-Indonesian origin—and the coastal people—of African descent. Reference was never made to race; the inhabitants were either the “coastal” or “highland” people. The majority of Malagasy were coastal. In fact, the two communities managed to co-exist,

although the highlanders were very much prejudiced against the coastal people, some of whom were descendants of slaves owned by the Merina monarchy about 100 years earlier. So the society was very complex, with tension between races or between people of different social backgrounds.

I also began a campaign to get Washington to do something for Madagascar. I was very interested in having a senior US government official pay a visit; it would stroke Ratsiraka's ego as well as being an action-stimulating event to force Washington to pay some attention to Madagascar. I sent a message requesting such a visit; I also suggested that a senior military officer come to visit. On the latter, the CINC of the US Indian Ocean fleet did come. The President put his plane at our disposal and we flew to Diego Suarez to look at the Soviet base that was supposed to be there. In fact, there was nothing there — which made our admiral happy. We had reassurances that neither we nor the Soviets would use Diego Suarez. This was fine by us because our principal objective was to deny the use of the port to the Soviets; we had no need to use it. The Admiral's visit was also instrumental in moving Madagascar away from the Soviet orbit and into at least a neutral position.

Later, Vernon Walters—ex-general, ex-ambassador, and representative extraordinaire — visited Madagascar. That was a very successful visit. When Walters was in Paris as our military attach#, Ratsiraka had been Madagascar's attach#. Walters remembered Ratsiraka. Walters charmed the Malagasy—he was an enormous success. He also gave a further push to our drive to move the Malagasy away from their leftist policies. So our relationship was warming up. It was very helpful that we agreed to supply rice to Madagascar under the PL 480 program. Ratsiraka was profoundly surprised that we provided rice; he did not think that the US would ever do anything like that. When we provided the rice, we noted that it was the rice of the ancestors—Carolina rice had come originally from Madagascar in pirate ships. That made a big impact because the Malagasy are very sentimental people. In fact, I think our PL 480 rice actually came from Texas, but I didn't know this at the time of the first shipment. We were not in a position to assist

the Malagasy to improve their own rice cultivation practices; that would have required an assistance program which was not available during most of my tour. In any case, the Malagasy were beginning to work again with the French and the World Bank.

Eventually, we managed to start a small assistance program. I take real pride in being able to re-establish a friendly relationship between the US and Madagascar. That was my principal goal because with the establishment of closer ties, we were also able to help lead the Malagasy in a different direction from that which they had taken during their Soviet courtship days. I mentioned earlier that Madagascar had been neo-colonial. That was true, but it underwent tremendous change between my two tours. By 1980, Madagascar was very, very poor. There were many shortages—e.g. toilet paper, sugar, oil, soap, aspirin. Rice would disappear from the marketplace. It was a 25% hardship post. When the Embassy Marine Guards held their annual Marine Ball at the Hilton they paid for the evening in part by bartering toilet paper and soap. Times were tough in Madagascar.

Ratsiraka's government had rejected the French language. It was decided that schools would use only Malagasy. That seriously hampered the whole educational system because there are a number of subjects that were difficult to teach in Malagasy, notably mathematics. Finally the government changed its policy and on its own, without pressure from France, and teaching in French was resumed. French assistance was returning. The new French Ambassador was of an entirely different stripe than the one that had been there during my first tour. My colleague was not a pro-consul. He was a professional diplomat. France was patiently, slowly trying to wean Madagascar away from its many poor practices. Fundamentally, Madagascar was never really a leftist state. It is a very Christian country. The goal of all Western governments was to get the Malagasy to modernize. France led the way with a far less paternalistic policy.

I should make a comment about Madagascar itself. It is a very different country than the US. For example, the Malagasy word for “foreigner” is “alien” —like an extraterrestrial being. It is truly difficult to become close to a Malagasy. They believe in spirits and they

worship their ancestors. It is a country in which the dead are unburied and re-wrapped. During a reburial ceremony, the dead might be paraded around town so that they can see the changes that have taken place since their departure from earth. Houses in Madagascar are often tall because one wants to live at least on the second floor because the spirits won't go up. Life and death are closely intermingled; there is a great deal of superstition in Madagascar. There are many taboos.

Madagascar is an island; it is quite isolated. Events in other parts of Africa—e.g. South Africa—were of little concern. The Malagasy were concerned about the Comoro Islands which were nearby. They were concerned about the mercenaries there which I will mention later. There were occasions when the Malagasy were concerned about the possibility of South Africa mounting a coup, but those were unfounded fears. The regime which preceded Ratsiraka had allowed airline flights between South Africa and Madagascar, but they had been long suspended by the time I arrived as ambassador.

I got to know the head of the World Wildlife Foundation in Madagascar. He was of African ancestry. He invited me to go camping in the forest—with our spouses— so that we could see lemurs. I was interested in nature and also a great supporter of the World Wildlife Foundation. So indeed we went into the forest and camped during a beautiful and wonderful weekend. We watched the lemurs flying overhead. After our return home, I learned that I had scandalized the highlanders because a) the forest was the home of the spirits and b) I had gone into the forest with a black person. As I said earlier, the highlanders were very prejudiced against black people.

It was not a major scandal, but the word about my forest trip had gotten around. In fact, Ratsiraka was delighted because he was from the same tribe as the head of the Madagascar chapter of World Wildlife Federation. That is not why I had gone, but my action confirmed that I was not prejudiced. The end of this story came when Madagascar gave Duke University permission to send a team to capture a mate for Nigel. The Embassy was very much involved in this operation—e.g., the Embassy stored the team's

equipment, including the dart guns. In fact, Duke captured many mouse lemurs which escaped their cages and got loose in the Marine Guard house, causing a small panic. Duke captured three propithecus lemurs—two females and one male. I should mention that Nigel and his mate, Diana, had offspring. I was a hero in my daughter's eyes—mission accomplished.

My wife was a member of an organization called “The Wednesday Morning Group.” This consisted of the diplomatic spouses, the wife of the Foreign Minister and the women of high society in the highlands. The common language was French. The group provided small amounts for self-help projects—mainly in the highlands. It was a good organization. One day, the wife of the Foreign Minister recommended a project in the lowlands. The highland spouses objected. Marian, who rarely spoke at these meetings because she was reluctant to speak French in public, did on this occasion speak in favor of the project. In fact, the group approved the project. At the end of my tour in Madagascar when the subject of giving me a decoration was raised (all ambassadors are normally decorated at the end of their tours in Madagascar), Foreign Minister Richard insisted that he would have to decorate me personally as a “reward” for support of his wife's proposal at the “Wednesday Morning Group”—when Madame Richard had the courage to propose and Marian to support a project for the lowlands.

The AF Bureau was very supportive of my efforts and I think pleased with our accomplishments. I must note that while Ambassador to Madagascar, I was also accredited to the Comoro Islands. I was the first ambassador—albeit non-resident—to that country. I presented my credentials to President Abdallah in 1981. It took me a while because, with the change in administrations in Washington, new agr#ment had to be requested. The Comoro Islands is a very small country. We wanted a relationship with the Comoros based on our policy of universality, but we were not about to make any investments in that country. All we wanted was to maintain a relationship by making

periodic visits. The Comoros wanted us to do a lot more; the French were already engaged there and that was enough as far as the US was concerned.

South African and Rhodesian mercenaries were involved in the Comoros; in fact, they had installed the government then in power. They were very much in evidence, although slowly, over a period of years, their influence declined.

Madagascar is a country of many surprises; one is never quite sure how things will turn out. The Malagasy don't forget their friends. After I had left, the Malagasy Embassy in Washington continued to extend invitations to Marian and myself; the bonds they establish are enduring, as befits “the country of ancestors.” Q: You left Madagascar in 1983. You became the Director of Andean Affairs in ARA.

RONDON: I was the Director from 1983 to 1985. My portfolio covered Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. As Director, I often had to speak to American audiences about our Latin American policies. This was of course during the Reagan administration's focus on Central America. I would talk about the three “Ds”: democracy, debt and drugs. Those were the three topics that were constant themes during my working hours.

Under “democracy”, this included the struggles in Central America against terrorism and military dictatorships. There were debt restructuring agreements everywhere; it was a major issue.The Andes was a major source of cocaine for the US. It was a very active period for our office and drugs were the number one topic. We had negotiated an extradition agreement with Colombia which would allow the Colombian drug traffickers to be turned over to the US. The “narcos” threatened to kill five Americans for every Colombian extradited. We had visions of a real slaughter after the first extradition took place. That particular operation was the most secret matter that I was ever involved in. In Colombia, the DCM, the DEA chief, and the Embassy's narcotics coordinator hid out together in an apartment. I was in touch with them and, working together with Justice, we

were trying to prevent leaks in this extradition operation. Fortunately, it went off without a hitch.

We did begin, even before this extradition, to evacuate families of official Americans in Colombia. The fear of violence against Americans in Colombia was magnified by the bombing of our Embassy in Beirut. Secretary Shultz was determined to prevent any other American bloodshed. The Department was fully prepared to send 747s to La Paz to evacuate all Americans, but the staff in Colombia was much opposed to evacuation because it would have undermined Colombian anti-narcotics efforts. Ambassador Lewis Tambs and DCM Jim Tull performed exceptionally well.

This was the time when the Minister of Justice was assassinated. He had not worn his bulletproof vest; it was found in the seat next to him in his car. The Ambassador had given him that vest. The Embassy devoted almost all of its time to fighting the drug trade.

For Venezuela, the main issue was debt rescheduling, but there were other economic issues as well. Our relations with Ecuador were on a even keel; we did not have any major problems with that country in this period—there were no tuna boat seizures. Peru was beginning to prosper and there was no renewal of tensions over the Peru-Ecuador border. There were some signs of trouble ahead for Peru, but the difficulties didn't really arise until after 1985.

On the other hand, I spent a lot of time on Bolivia because of the potential for overthrow of a democratically elected government by the military. Ed Corr, our Ambassador in La Paz, really had to engage in active diplomacy to try to save the country from a military coup.

Tony Motley was the Assistant Secretary for ARA during the 1983-86 period. I had been recruited by his predecessor, Tom Enders, but he had left just as I reported for duty. Lowell Kilday was the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South America. I found the Bureau staff to be very closely knit. People worked together very well. Motley had an excellent relationship with George Shultz. As Country Director, I was given considerable leeway. As

I said, the drug issues and democracy in Bolivia were the issues on which I had to focus the most.

As a general description of the atmosphere in ARA, I would say that it was a one-issue bureau: Central America and especially El Salvador. Motley spent almost all of his time on that matter. That meant South America did not get enough top-level attention. Motley had been our Ambassador to Brazil and continued to be very interested in that country, but he was consumed by Central America. As I said earlier, the South America issues were drug, debt and democracy. Debt tended to be handled by the Treasury Department; drugs, although very clear cut, raised difficult challenges; democracy was the area where our ambassadors could be most effective and some, like Corr, were. We in the South American offices were observers of events in Central America; all we could do was watch our front office spend most of its time on that part of the world. In any case, as an Office Director or a desk officer, you are consumed with your own problems; there isn't much time to be interested in other Bureau issues.

In general, despite considerable progress some of the South America countries were making on democracy, there was anxiety in the Bureau about the future. We were always concerned that one country or another could slip back into military rule and thus precipitate retrogression throughout the region. Today, I think there is real optimism about the march of democracy in Latin America, aided by the collapse of the Soviet empire and the success of free markets. Solutions imposed by the state have become discredited, but that was not the case in the mid 1980s; democracy was still very fragile. It is true that South America was changing, but that required a continual diplomatic effort on our part. Democracy had not been a way of life south of our borders; so these new opportunities gave our embassies considerable workload; they were busy supporting democratic progress.

For example, in Bolivia, Ed Corr was continually admonishing the military about the potential consequences of any coup; he was advising the civilian government to be careful about certain military officers. In the past, Latin America military establishments

had assumed that although the US would not be happy with a coup, after a while, if the military promised free and democratic elections, relations would come back to normal. Our ambassadors were quite explicit and clear that a coup would be viewed most negatively in the US and that a high price would have to be paid in our relations. We were not of course going to move our military in to prevent a coup, but we would undoubtedly extract an economic price—actions on the trade front, cessation of economic assistance. As more Latin countries became democratic, there was an increasing willingness to ostracize any country that might slip back into dictatorship; that was also a new element in the region.

There were some quarters in the administration which would not have minded a military coup in Bolivia because its civilian government was viewed as leftist; it was suggested that a more active anti-Bolivian government policy be pursued. Bolivia was not anti-American, but there were some concerns that the government could become more radical, thereupon ushering in an anti-American policy. More sober voices in the administration counseled a steady US policy, looking to the next round of democratic elections. Those sober voices won the day and we pursued a patient policy towards Bolivia.

The Andean countries did not exhibit any major concerns about our Central American policies. There was some Andean disrespect for Honduras, which had allowed a strong US military presence within its borders. El Salvador was slowly getting its act together with a civilian government. In any case, that country had good international links, thanks to its Christian Democratic government. In my part of the world, the US strongly supported democratically elected governments, even if they had leftist tendencies such as the one in Bolivia. We might have preferred a different government; nevertheless we gave it our full support, as we did to all democratically elected governments in the region.

Q: You left your position as Director of the Office for Andean Affairs in 1985.You then went as US Ambassador to Ecuador until 1988. How did that appointment come about?

RONDON: I was selected by Assistant Secretary Motley. I don't know exactly how the selection was made; I assume that he discussed the possibility with the Director General and other senior officials of the Department and that eventually my name was approved and sent to the White House. I was very pleased to be selected. Ecuador is a choice assignment and therefore it came as a great surprise to me. Eventually, my name went through the vetting process and was approved by the Senate; I don't think it hit a snag anywhere along the line.

Having worked on Ecuador for two years, I was, of course, familiar with the issues in US-Ecuador relations. Ecuador had been the first South American country to return to democracy. The elected President was Jaime Roldos. He was killed in an airplane crash and succeeded by the Vice-President, Hurtado, who finished his term in 1984. President Leon Febres Cordero succeeded him. He was a man of the right—succeeding a man of the center/left. The new president was uncomfortable with the US Embassy, feeling that it preferred the center/left politicians. That was not a fair charge. It is true that the Embassy had a relationship with the previous Ecuadorian administrations, but that was its business. The Embassy wanted the same close relationship with the new government.

Nevertheless, President Febres Cordero wanted a change in our Embassy, and he welcomed me warmly. I was warned before I left Washington by Lowell Kilday that my assignment would be a difficult one because the new president knew the US and spoke English well. Kilday said, “Those are the toughest!” More prophetic words could not have been spoken! Leon Febres Cordero was in many ways a Reaganite—very much a “Marlboro man”—a cowboy! He loved horses; he was a champion marksman. He came from Guayaquil, a coastal city. That meant he had quite a temperament. He had a long, white mane of hair; his first name was quite appropriate because he sort of looked like a lion. Febres Cordero had graduated from an engineering school in New Jersey; that is how he came to know the US so well. He loved chili dogs. Never a cautious diplomat, Febres

Cordero always came right to the point. I found him charming and fun, mercurial, and a challenge for me.

The most important American company in Ecuador was Texaco because of the oil concessions. Texaco was in a consortium with the Ecuadorian state oil company. I visited Texaco's Coral Gables headquarters before going to Quito.

The President was very close to his military; it supported his center/right views. It is true that the Ecuadorian military had not accepted democratic practices; in fact, I think it was biding its time. In Latin America, “turn style” politics are well known—i.e. rotation between civilian and military rule.

Ecuador had a small terrorist movement called Alfaro Vive Carajo, for short called the AVC. Before I got to Ecuador it had kidnaped one of the President's closest friends—a banker from Guayaquil. The President had ordered a SWAT team to break into the house where the banker was being held; in the operation the banker was killed. That traumatic experience led the President to build up Ecuador's counter-terrorist capacities. As often happens, this elevated the normal jealousies between the police and the military.

When I arrived in Ecuador, I was looking forward to the development of a strong relationship between the Ecuadorian government and ours. The US was providing considerable assistance including ESF (Economic Support Funds). Ecuador was in the process of experimenting with a free market economy, fully supported by the new President. I fully expected to see Reaganomics/Thatchernomics in Ecuador, notwithstanding an Ecuadorian Congress that leaned to the left.

Ecuador is a small country. Its politics are described as “cannibalistic.” Politics were “cut throat”; no one would ever give a rightist President any credit; it was always assumed that the US Embassy was behind every governmental action—and particularly the US

Ambassador. My predecessors and I were viewed as pro-consuls. So it was a difficult assignment. I was covered continuously by the press—I was a “hot ticket.”

I had some very difficult challenges. First of all, as I mentioned earlier, we had to be very wary of the military, which was a constant threat to the democratic form of government. Throughout my tour, I had to engage in “prevention diplomacy”. I had an excellent military attach# staff as well as a strong Military Group commander, who were close friends. We were all on the same wave length; we saw eye-to-eye on what we needed to do to keep the Ecuadorian military out of the presidency. It was clear to us that any successful effort by the Ecuadorian military to take over the government would bring an end to the close relationships between our two countries, so we kept emphasizing the risks and the unacceptability of a coup. In 1986, General Frank Vargas, the Air Force Commander, actually attempted to lead a coup. It was unsuccessful and landed him in jail. Vargas acted because he was passed over when it came time to select the Ecuadorian equivalent of US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As was customary, an Army general, Jorge Asanza, was selected. So Vargas tried to overthrow the government. After he was thrown into jail, a group of Air Force commandos tried to rescue Vargas by attacking the President during one of his visits to an Air Force base. Commandos killed two Presidential bodyguards and took the President hostage. Under duress, the President ordered the release of Vargas; the commandos then released the President. That was my worst period in Ecuador—it lasted about 24 hours.

I don't think the President ever recovered from this experience. A man full of vigor and vitality saw death at his feet—his bodyguards. He was shaken. The Ecuadorian Congress, instead of rallying around him after this terrible ordeal, blamed the President for the events. That was another sad day; Ecuador could not rally around a President whose life had just been in serious jeopardy. The venom that characterized Ecuadorian politics was in evidence even in a moment of great peril.

After that kidnaping came a devastating earthquake. Marian and I were sound asleep when were awakened by a very strong shake. We went back to bed. Thirty minutes later we were awakened again, this time by an even more severe shake. Usually, the first shock is the bad one; in this case, it was the second one. That spooked us; we got up and dressed. We parked the armored limousine right by the door so that if there was another serious shock, we could dive into the car and use it as a shelter. Suddenly, the Marines showed up. They had run to the residence from the chancery, which was about a mile away, to offer help. Soon after that many Embassy staff members showed up at the chancery. I remember the DCM, Bob Morley, arriving barefoot. He and his wife lived in a penthouse at the rim of a ravine. The building had swayed noticeably. Mrs Morley said she would never return to that apartment. I think about 50 or 60 Americans moved into the chancery that night. The Marines were concerned about housing families' dogs; I told them not to worry about them. I was glad that the staff had found a place where they felt safe. For two days, we suffered through after shocks. I was relieved that none of our staff was injured. Soon some Peace Corps volunteers drifted in from the countryside. Some had had narrow escapes; one found his wall had collapsed while he was sleeping, but he survived.

The earthquakes had devastated the Amazon region, cutting the country's oil pipeline and main road which led form Quito to the vicinity of the jungle—it did not quite reach the jungle. There was a need for immediate assistance. Vice President George Bush came to provide support personally; he offered hope and pledged tangible support. The US government responded very quickly with all sorts of assistance—tents, plastic sheeting, etc. Along with the immediate consequences of the earthquake were the problems of the destruction of the main road and the pipeline. Texaco, working with the Ecuadorians, undertook to get the pipeline back into operation. But the road had to be opened again; there were thousands of people in Ecuador who depended on that road for their sole contact with the rest of the country. The Ecuadorians organized an airlift to get foodstuffs to these communities, including the Texaco compound. The planes brought out goods from the Amazon.

All of this coincided with a US military training exercise scheduled to take place along the coast in Manta. The US had proposed to build a road for that exercise. Manta had been chosen for several reasons: 1) It was the third most populated region of Ecuador. 2)The road would have been useful even after the exercise. 3) The construction would have been relatively easy because the road would have followed the coastline and the construction soldiers would not have to go beyond the coast. But perhaps most importantly, the construction of such a road would have had a lot of local political support. The US would not have been criticized for building in an area which enjoyed a lot of representation in the Ecuadorian Congress.

After the earthquake there was no possibility of building the coastal road. All the Ecuadorian military efforts were completely devoted to rescue and reconstruction. So our military suggested that it assist instead with the reconstruction of the main road and also add to the airlift capacity. I gulped, because this proposal shelved the coast road plan, which had been very carefully crafted and considered. At the same time, I recognized that we could be of great assistance to a country which had just been devastated. I could not block our military's very generous offer. I agreed.

That turned out to be the most controversial decision I have ever made. I had no problems with our own Washington people; both State and Defense supported the idea of lending a hand. We offered to build a detour that would have allowed a connection between two segments of the main road that had been severed by the earthquake. We knew that we could not build the whole detour; we thought we could start at one end and the Ecuadorians at the other end and the two would meet. I thought that our efforts would be very helpful. Eventually, the Ecuadorians decided that they wanted to focus on rebuilding the main road; the detour became of marginal interest.

I soon found out that the US military had forgotten how to build a road in a tropical jungle. It had not done so since Vietnam and had lost those skills. The road that our military first tried to build sank into the mud. The natives watched with amazement until they finally

they suggested that our military use their techniques for jungle road building. Their system called for first sinking logs into the mud to provide a base upon which the road could be built.

Eventually our military changed its techniques and indeed progress was made. But our assistance efforts became a political football. The left ranted against the US for building a road in the jungle; it accused us of building a missile base or something. The area was not very populated. This meant that our efforts had little political support. Ecuador's opposition Congress had nothing to lose by criticizing the US for its work in the jungle.

The Ecuadorian President had asked for our assistance for building that road in the jungle. The Ecuadorian military were pleased that we were working out there. Our military was doing its best to rebuild the road and at the same time relearning lessons on jungle road construction. The US road building manual was actually rewritten as a result of this experience in Ecuador. So it was a very valuable training exercise for the US Army.

On the other hand, it was a political disaster. After a while, the government decided to terminate our road building efforts. That was painful because we had the best of motives —we wanted to help. The unpopularity of President Febres Cordero damaged this project as much as anything else. The US moved thousands of tons of food stuffs into the jungle area and even the Papal Nuncio gave public thanks to us for that assistance. The priests in the jungle had reported to him about our efforts; the bishop who knew what we were doing was offended by the criticism that was being levied against us for the road project. The Nuncio was then criticized for speaking out, but in fact, he told the truth and spoke from the heart.

I remember speaking to Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, who visited Ecuador soon after the earthquake. He said that one could never be expected to be thanked for any act of charity. That is probably true, but this experience with earthquake relief was a bitter one. The US military was willing to stick with the project even if it took a few years

and even though it was no longer essential to reach the oil communities because it felt an obligation to complete its work. But politically, that became impossible because, somehow, by building the road, we had violated the heartland of Ecuador. The criticism aimed at us was unfounded and unfair. Should we have been astute enough to anticipate what happened? I think perhaps we should have, but I don't think it was possible for us to deny requests for assistance in the period immediately following such a devastating earthquake. Such a refusal would have been callous.

I think it should be noted here that my personal relationships with the opposition members of Congress were excellent. I was told before I arrived that the President of Ecuador would never tolerate the American Ambassador dealing with his political enemies. But I had a heart-to-heart conversation with the President during which I told him that if I were ever to be perceived as his captive, I would be destroyed as an ambassador. I told him that my government expected me to have relationships with all democratic segments of the Ecuadorian political system. He understood and accepted my position. So I met periodically with the former president, Oswaldo Hurtado, despite the fact that he did not approve of my close relationship with his successor. I dealt with the Izquierda Democratica —the democratic left—which became the dominant party after Febres Cordero's term and I had a close relationship with key members of that party.

I should mention an incident that involved Abdala Bucaram, the recently ousted President of Ecuador, and myself. When I arrived in Ecuador, Bucaram was the Mayor of Guayaquil. He was a mercurial figure; I was told that I should not call on him because he was an “enemy” of the President of Ecuador. I took the same position that I had taken with the President; I would not let internal Ecuadorian politics dictate my contacts. After all, Guayaquil was the most populous city in Ecuador and Bucaram was democratically elected. I felt that I had to call on him and establish a relationship with this important, democratically elected official. So I called on him. All was very friendly and cordial. He gave me a medal—a large coin representing his city.

After the visit, he accused me publicly of having threatened him. He said the US had killed his brother-in-law, President Roldos, who had died in an airplane crash. These accusations, of course, made the front page of Ecuadorian newspapers. I couldn't defend myself very well because I just couldn't get into a public debate in the press—it would have been a mud fight. I quietly but firmly denied the accusations and hoped that time would take care of the problem. The Mayor of Guayaquil was a cousin of the head of Texaco, who thought that the whole affair was idiotic. The Texaco representative arranged a quiet, private meeting between Bucaram and myself. That stopped the criticism of me and the US.

Eventually, Bucaram came to the Residence. I knew that Bucaram might be elected President of Ecuador. It was important that he not carry grudges against the US. In fact, the US had nothing against Bucaram or any member of his family. An ambassador has to reach out to all parts of the community and try to overcome any mistaken perceptions. As I mentioned, eventually Bucaram was elected President of Ecuador.

So I had good relationships with representatives of the whole democratic political spectrum in Ecuador, despite the fact that for them “all is fair in love and politics.” Politics are a cut-throat game. The individual politicians are socially very nice people, but politics turns them into intolerant rivals.

Politics in Ecuador are complicated by the great rivalry between the industrious, populous coast and the highlands. The capital with the country's bureaucracy is in the highlands.

Ecuador waged a campaign against drug cultivation. Most of the coca plantings were eradicated while I was there. We helped fund the eradication project. Sometimes, when we flew to the Columbia-Ecuador border, you could see the cultivation on the Colombian side but there was none visible on the Ecuadorian side. I doubt that the eradication was 100% successful, but it was very significant. There were continual overflights and when cultivation was spotted, it was immediately destroyed. The President of Ecuador must

be given credit for waging a winning war against coca cultivation. We were aware of trafficking and money laundering taking place, but there were no major prosecutions while I served in Ecuador. There were many minor criminal prosecutions.

One substantive area that could have been much more controversial was counter-terrorism. The President organized an elite police unit which pretty effectively rooted out whatever small terrorist activities that did exist. Much of the violence took place before I arrived, but there were some threats against me. I had pretty heavy security. I don't know how credible the threats were, but since Ecuador is Colombia's neighbor, it was not impossible for members of Colombia's M-19 or some “narcos” to cross the border and take a crack shot at me under the assumption that such action might be easier in Ecuador than in their home country.

Q: When your tour ended in 1988, you went to the UN.

RONDON: That is right; I was assigned to the US Mission as the regional advisor for Latin America. After that, George Vest, the Director General, suggested that I go work for the Inspector General. I had been interested in the IG for sometime. I think there was an assumption that I would be offered another ambassadorship and indeed, I was the Department's selectee for Costa Rica but the White House had a different candidate. In 1992 I headed the Senior Seminar and retired from there in 1994.

As I said, in 1988 I went to New York to work for our Mission to the UN during the Fall General Assembly meeting. Vernon Walters was the head of our delegation at the time. He was very effective. He was revered by the other UN diplomats and well liked by his own staff. He spoke many languages which gave him access to many people. He always seemed to be available to other delegations, whether they be large or small, important or not. He was wed to his work and represented the US very well. The fact that he had access to the President whenever needed made his position quite powerful.

The UN delegation in the fall of 1988 was supplemented by two US Senators—one was Chris Dodd (D-Conn). I was a little apprehensive when I heard that Dodd was going to be a member of the delegation because he had just interfered in the Foreign Service promotion process. Over the period of his work in NY, I got to know him pretty well and I asked him about his blocking two names on the promotion list. He told me that he thought that an officer in El Salvador had lied to him. What I remember most was how approachable Dodd was and how well he supported me in my UN work. He went with me when we called on all of the small Caribbean delegations. The fact that Dodd was willing to do that was very helpful; he really worked very effectively on Ambassador Walter's team during the GA. I was very impressed by Dodd's knowledge of Latin America and his total dedication to our team's effort. I came to think very highly of the Senator.

I worked on Latin American issues. I supplemented the efforts of our delegation by providing expertise in the area. The fact that I had been an ambassador facilitated our contacts with Latin American delegations. Most of what we did during the General Assembly meeting was to lobby. We ran around trying to line up votes and other delegations were doing the same thing. It was a very active and tiring period; the General Assembly can meet very late into an evening. I found it very interesting.

The 1988 General Assembly featured a speech by Gorbachev. Reagan also gave a speech but it didn't have nearly the impact that the reform-minded Soviet leader had. At the time, one of our principal goals was to isolate Cuba. We lobbied in support of constructive resolutions about Central America. That was the region that still dominated US Latin American policy. Essentially, that General Assembly session was not very significant from the Latin American point of view. The major focus was peace in Central America. The question of further democratization of the region was more of an issue for the Organization of American States. I recall the Human Rights Commission had issued a report in Geneva critical of Cuba. Cuba was always trying to deflect any criticism of

Castro's human rights record. The GA adopted that report after a great deal of lobbying on our part.

I mentioned that Gorbachev was the most exciting speaker at the GA meeting. Everyone was waiting for his remarks. I don't think anyone could have predicted the major events of the following year—the fall of the Berlin Wall—but it was very obvious that change was in the wind in the Soviet Union. So there were great expectations before Gorbachev spoke.

Q: After the General Assembly meeting in 1988, what happened?

RONDON: I learned during the UNGA that I would head the Department's inspection of U.S. operations in China. I had never been there; I wanted very much to go and the Department used it as a carrot to get me into the Inspection Corps. I joined the IG at the beginning of 1989. I was there for three years.

I found the IG an enlightening, fascinating experience. It did wonders for my wanderlust. I recused myself from inspecting Spanish Latin America where I had too many friends and professional ties. I wound up inspecting in 23 countries.

After I arrived in the IG, Inspector General Sherman Funk initiated inspectors' efficiency ratings (IERs) on ambassadors and DCMs. Although inspectors had the right to write IERs on anyone at a post, they tended to be written for remedial purposes—e.g., if an injustice had been done. But Funk decided that inspectors should comment in IERs on the Department's and post's leaders (assistant and deputy assistant secretaries, ambassadors, DCMs, and principal officers). Over the course of three years, I must have written close to 75 IERs.

People would ask me who got the better IERs: the political appointees or the career ambassadors? There was no general answer to that question; IERs varied from individual to individual. Some of my worst IERs were written on career ambassadors; some of the

worst were also written on political appointees. Over time, I found that ambassadors who were close to their staffs tended to get the better IERs.

I should also say that an IER is a peer review in many ways. I would go to inspect someone who was a total stranger to me. I would talk to a large number of the staff about the ambassador or DCM. I did the same thing in Washington.

I never tried to “get anyone.” It is hard enough to write an IER; it is far more difficult to write a negative one. We never knew how an inspection would turn out until we had completed our work at a post. In the case of political ambassadors, I tended to spend more time with them than with career ambassadors because I found that the former wanted to take advantage of my experience and get some insights on how problems were being handled at other posts. I never met a political ambassador who wasn't patriotic; I never met a political ambassador who didn't care how well he or she was discharging assigned responsibilities. I met some political ambassadors who were miscast; they probably should not have been made ambassadors, but that did not mean that they didn't take their work seriously and did their best for the US.

The DCM job is a more difficult one than that of the chief of mission. The ambassador has more responsibility but a DCM has to manage the organization. Most often the to Tunisia when we have poor countries that need it much more?” It had been a reasonable question and it was reasonable to phase out. But it would have been better if we had thought through whether or not we wanted to phase out earlier on. If we had decided that, no, no, we need to stay in, but let's do it in such and such a way to get the best impact out of a small amount of money that we were willing to put in.

Q: What did we end up focusing on?

WHEELER: We did this regional development project which was involved in reimbursement for expenditures made by the Tunisians for various kinds of infrastructure and so forth. Then we did an agricultural project. This was institution building. There

was an interest in Tunisia in building up their training capacity in agriculture. There were some other smaller things that I don't remember at the moment. But Tunisia did not want to consult with a group meeting in Paris with the World Bank as chair, but they [had pr]oblems. Sometimes we helped address injustices or abuse very easily; other times we were not free to reveal the source of information and we felt stuck. On the other hand, if we got the same information from a number of sources, even if provided confidentially by each, we could act because it would be very hard to learn who provided what information. We also had ready recourse to the IG's Office of Counsel.

I should say a few words about Sherman Funk. He was the first “outsider” to be appointed as Inspector General—as required by Congress. This mandate was not welcomed by the Foreign Service. I think Sherman came to the Department with some misgivings but, over the course of time I think he came to love the Department and to develop an enormous respect for the Foreign Service. He cared greatly about his work.

When I was accused—unfairly—of having spoken “out of school” during an inspection, I was investigated and exonerated. Sherman took action whoever might be involved. He had great integrity. He liked to have a feel for a post; he was interested in the human side of operations. He could be very tough if required. He had to do some things which were not politically popular which may have cost him his job eventually. It may have been the Clinton passport incident or Sherman's criticism of the US drug program which angered the Congress. The truth can be a political liability in Washington—and Sherman was truthful.

I found inspections to be very exciting. We inspected our embassy in Beijing during the period of the massive Tiananmen demonstrations. I remember arriving in China and noticing all the signs and posters, as if there were going to be an election. I got to walk around Beijing with the embassy's science attach#, an old China hand named Bill Thomas. We happened to be fellow bird-watchers. Thomas was troubled by what the signs said about China's leaders, and fearful that there was going to be a confrontation. He seemed

to be the pessimist at an optimistic embassy. One could feel magic in the air. Service in the hotel dining room would come to a complete halt while the students were marching by; waiters and guests would go to look; after the students went by, the dining service would return to normal. So you could feel some political movement. Only Thomas seemed to have misgivings about the final outcome, and sure enough, magic was not enough. We left Beijing the morning before Tiananmen when the Chinese army and police crushed the students. It was defeat of the young by the old. In the Foreign Service, we don't tend to pay much attention to the old; we listen to the younger generation. In the case of our Embassy in Beijing, wisdom rested with the oldest man in the organization —Thomas.

I am still involved in the inspection process, although I retired in 1994. The major change is that now the inspection staffs of State and USIA have been integrated. USIA inspectors are part of the team. Thus, I have acquired a much greater appreciation of USIA and its overseas efforts. Of course, this change has resulted in longer reports; that needs to change. Also, we are not inspecting posts as often as we used to—for budgetary reasons. Inspectors are being asked to do more and more; there is a limit to how much can be provided cost effectively. We have been asked to look at the ICASS system—a new accounting system. In years past, we had a system called “Shared Administrative Services”—a method under which every agency with representation overseas paid its appropriate share of administrative support services rendered by the Department. Now that system has been changed to one known as ICASS—a different accounting method. The Under Secretary for Management relies to some extent on inspectors to provide an evaluation of the new system. That creates an additional work-load. But in general, the inspection process has not changed much. The Inspection Corps is now headed by Jacqueline Williams-Bridgers, who is very organized and who is bringing more discipline to the process.

Q: In 1992, you went to the Senior Seminar as the Dean. How did that happen?

RONDON: While I was an inspector, as I mentioned earlier, I had expectations of being offered a third ambassadorship. The Department did nominate me to the White House, but as I said, the White House wanted someone else. In some sense, by being in the IG, I was serving on the margin. I was not in a position where I could leverage myself into another embassy. Eventually, I sought to serve my last two years in the Foreign Service as Dean of the Senior Seminar. I knew it was a program that focused largely on the US. I wanted my last two years to be of service to the Department. I served as Dean from 1992 to 1994 when I retired from the Foreign Service.

Dean of the Senior Seminar was a wonderful job. It taught me a great deal about managing people. The Senior Seminar had about thirty students—fifteen from the Department and fifteen from other agencies. Essentially, those thirty run their own program. There is no faculty. They bring to the program their own experiences. The class bonds—some have called it an oppressive bond—because the members become like brothers and sisters. They share their experiences with each other.

The sharing in that family environment was incredible. Some of the information shared was highly classified, which was no problem because all the students had security clearance, but it was important that such information was exchanged because otherwise many of the students would never have known what a CIA case officer did or what a military officer involved in the Iran rescue operation did in that circumstance or what it was like to be discriminated against as an African-American FSO in Vietnam. These experiences were shared very candidly; the class learned the most from each other. It is also true that the students had to park their egos and ambitions for the year; that helped them grow. They learned some very important lessons about their country.

In the first year, we used the Department's equal employment opportunity program. It was alright, but in the second year the class decided to turn to US corporations to find out what was happening in the economy. That was a real eye opener; we found that the concern of some government officials—about gays for example—was not an issue in

the private sector. Companies were employing people for their abilities; they didn't care whether they were gay, or female, or handicapped. Performance was the sole standard. The company had the responsibility for providing a friendly work environment—friendly to diversity because the task could not have been completed satisfactorily unless such an environment existed.

The proactive approach taken by the private sectors to these societal challenges was a revelation to the class. It was a very practical approach which spoke volumes about the evolution of our society. We also learned that many major corporations had to teach their new workers how to read and write because high schools were failing to discharge their responsibilities.

The class did many things like going to our Mexican border to watch the illegal immigration. We watched groups of Mexicans pouring over the border; there were so many of them that they couldn't be stopped. That was a surprise.

The two years were extraordinary; I learned so much about my country. It was fun to watch how the military representatives tended to take the class over at the beginning of the year —they are extroverted and “type-A.” But over time, the quieter types got their oars in and there was a balance in the class.

The Senior Seminar is the most valued inter-agency training program offered by any executive branch agency. The Department does not value the program as much as the other agencies do. For example, I think the FBI appreciates the training the most, even though it is not police training. USIA considers the Senior Seminar their finest training available. Of course, USIA's charter is to tell America's story abroad; that makes the Senior Seminar very valuable to it. It pays every year for two students to participate, even though the Agency has continual funding shortages. The Senior Seminar teaches its students more about the US than any other training course in the government.

The Senior Seminar was always short on funds. Sometimes personnel who should not be there were assigned or “parked” at the Seminar—they were not ambassadorial or very senior executive material. I was always sad when the Department misused this extraordinary program. It appeared to be prized most by non-State agencies.

I retired in 1994 and was asked to lead inspections again, something I have been very happy to do. I had a wonderful career and, in some ways, it continues. I've been lucky.

End of interview